THE LOOKOUT MAN

B·M·BOWER

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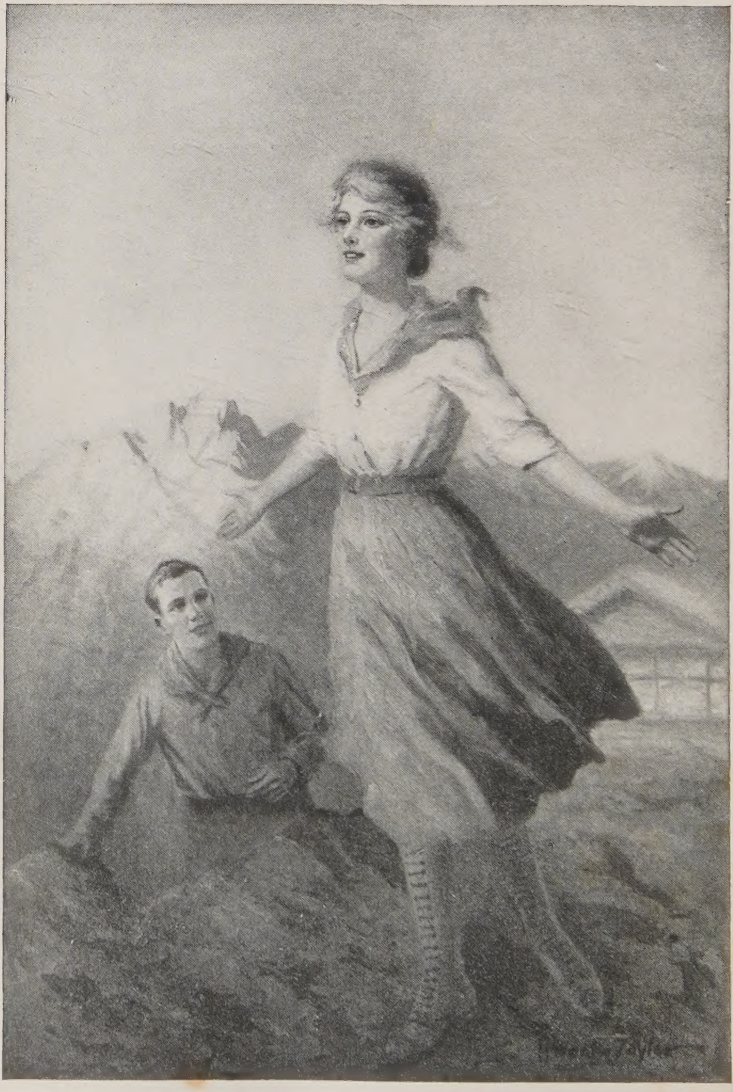

She was, after all, the goddess she looked, he thought whimsically.
FRONTISPIECE. *See page 122.*

THE
LOOKOUT MAN

BY

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CHIP OF THE FLYING U, ETC.

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY
H. WESTON TAYLOR

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THE LOOKOUT MAN

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CHAPTER ONE

SOME TIME!

FROM the obscurity of vast, unquiet distance the surf came booming in with the heavy impetus of high tide, flinging long streamers of kelp and bits of driftwood over the narrowing stretch of sand where garishly costumed bathers had lately shrieked hilariously at their gambols. Before the chill wind that had risen with the turn of the tide the bathers retreated in dripping, shivering groups, to appear later in fluffs and furs and woollen sweaters; still inclined to hilarity, still undeniably loth to leave off their pleasuring at Venice, dedicated to cheap pleasures.

But when the wind blew stronger and the surf boomed louder and nearer, and the faint moon-path stretched farther and farther toward the smudgy sky-line, city-going street-cars began to fill with sunburned passengers, and motors began to purr out of the narrow side streets lined with shoddy buildings which housed the summer sojourners. One more Sunday night's revelry was tapering off into shouted farewells, clanging gongs, honking horns and the shuffling of tired feet hurrying homeward.

In cafés and grills and private dining rooms groups of revelers, whose pleasures were not halted by the nickel alarm-clocks ticking inexorably all over the city and its suburbs, still lingered long after the masses had gone home yawning and counting the fullness of past joys by the present extent of smarting sunblisters.

Automobiles loaded with singing passengers scurried after their own beams of silver light down the boulevards. At first a continuous line of speeding cars; then thinning with long gaps between; then longer gaps with only an occasional car; then the quiet, lasting for minutes unbroken, so that the wind could be heard in the eucalyptus trees that here and there lined the boulevard.

After the last street-car had clanged away from the deserted bunting-draped joy zone that now was stark and joyless, a belated seven-passenger car, painted a rich plum color and splendid in upholstering and silver trim, swept a long row of darkened windows with a brush of light as it swung out from a narrow alley and went purring down to where the asphalt shone black in the night.

Full throated laughter and a medley of shouted jibes and current witticisms went with it. The tonneau squirmed with uproarious youth. The revolving extra seats swung erratically, propelled by energetic hands, while some one barked the stereotyped invitation to the deserted scenic swing, and some one else shouted to the revolving occupants to keep their heads level, and all the others laughed foolishly.

The revolving ones rebelled, and in the scuffle some one lurched forward against the driver at a critical turn in the road, throwing him against the wheel. The big car swerved almost into the ditch, was brought back just in the nick of time and sped on, while Death, who had looked into that tonneau, turned away with a shrug.

The driver, bareheaded and with the wind blowing his thick mop of wavy hair straight back from his forehead, glanced back with swift disfavor at the scuffling bunch.

"Hey — you want to go in the ditch?" he expostulated, chewing vigorously upon gum that still tasted sweet and full-flavored. "You wanta cut out that rough stuff over this way!"

"*All* right, Jackie, old boy, anything to please!" chanted the offender, cuffing the cap off the fellow next him. "Some time," he added with vague relish. "S-o-m-e time! What?"

"Some time is right!" came the exuberant chorus. "Hey, Jack! *You* had some time, all right — you and that brown-eyed queen that danced like Mrs. Castle. Um-um! Floatin' round with your arms full of sunshine — oh, you thought you was puttin' something over on the rest of us — what?"

"Cut it out!" Jack retorted, flinging the words over his shoulder. "Don't talk to me. Road's flopping around like a snake with its head cut off —" He laughed apologetically, his eyes staring straight ahead over the lowered windshield.

"Aw, step on her, Jack! Show some class, boy — show some class! Good old boat! If you're too stewed to drive 'er, *she* knows the way home. Say, Jackie, if this old car could talk, wouldn't momma get an ear-full on Monday, hey? What if she —"

"Cut it *out* — or I'll throw you out!" came back over Jack's shirt-clad shoulder. He at least had the wit to use what little sense he had in driving the car, and he had plenty of reason to believe that he could carry out his threat, even if the boulevard did heave itself up at him like the writhings of a great snake. If his head was not fit for the job, his trained muscles would still drive with automatic precision. Only his vision was clouded; not the mechanical skill necessary to pilot his mother's big car safely into the garage.

Whim held the five in the rear seats absorbed in their own maudlin comicalities. The fellow beside Jack did not seem to take any interest in his surroundings, and the five gave the front seat no further attention. Jack drove circumspectly, leaning a little forward, his bare arms laid up across the wheel and grasping the top of it. Brown as bronze, those arms, as were his face and neck and chest down to where the open V of his sport shirt was held closed with the loose knot of a crimson tie that whipped his shoulder as he drove. A fine looking fellow he was, sitting there like the incarnation of strength and youth and fullblooded optimism. It was a pity that he was drunk — he would have been a perfect specimen of young manhood, else.

The young man on the front seat beside him turned suddenly on those behind. The lower half of his face was covered with a black muffler. He had a gun, and he "cut down" on the group with disconcerting realism.

"Hands up!" he intoned fearsomely. "I am the mysterious lone bandit of the boulevards. Your jewels are the price of your lives!" The six-shooter wavered, looking bleakly at one and then another.

After the first stunned interval, a shout of laughter went up from those behind. "Good! Good idea!"

one approved. And another, having some familiarity with the mechanics of screen melodrama, shouted, "Camera!"

"Lone bandit nothing! We're *all* mysterious auto bandits out seeking whom we may devour!" cried a young man with a naturally attractive face and beautiful teeth, hastily folding his handkerchief cornerwise for a mask, and tying it behind his head — to the great discomfort of his neighbors, who complained bitterly at having their eyes jabbed out with his elbows.

The bandit play caught the crowd. For a few tumultuous minutes elbows were up, mufflers and handkerchiefs flapping. There emerged from the confusion six masked bandits, and three of them flourished six-shooters with a recklessness that would have given a Texas man cold chills down his spine. Jack, not daring to take his eyes off the heaving asphalt, or his hands off the wheel, retained his natural appearance until some generous soul behind him proceeded, in spite of his impatient "Cut it out, fellows!" to confiscate his flapping, red tie and bind it across his nose; which transformed Jack Corey into a speeding fiend, if looks meant anything. Thereafter they threw themselves back upon the suffering upholstery and commented gleefully upon their banditish qualifications.

That grew tame, of course. They thirsted for mock horrors, and two glaring moons rising swiftly over a hill gave the psychological fillip to their imaginations.

"Come on — let's hold 'em up!" cried the young man on the front seat. "Naw — I'll tell you! Slow down, Jack, and everybody keep your faces shut. When we're just past I'll shoot down at the ground by a hind wheel. Make 'em think they've got a blowout — get the idea?"

"Some idea!" promptly came approval, and the six subsided immediately.

The coming car neared swiftly, the driver shaving as close to the speed limit as he dared. Unsuspectingly he swerved to give plenty of space in passing, and as he did so a loud bang startled him. The brake squealed as he made an emergency stop. "Blowout, by thunder!" they heard him call to his companions, as he piled out and ran to the wheel he thought had suffered the accident.

Jack obligingly slowed down so that the six, leaning far out and craning back at their victims, got the full benefit of their joke. When he sped on they fell back into their seats and howled with glee.

It was funny. They laughed and slapped one another on the backs, and the more they laughed the funnier it seemed. They rocked with mirth, they bounced up and down on the cushions and whooped.

All but Jack. He kept his eyes on the still-heaving asphalt, and chewed gum and grinned while he drove, with the persistent sensation that he was driving a hydro-aëroplane across a heaving ocean. Still, he knew what the fellows were up to, and he was perfectly willing to let them have all the fun they wanted, so long as they didn't interfere with his driving.

In the back of his mind was a large, looming sense of responsibility for the car. It was his mother's car, and it was new and shiny, and his mother liked to drive flocks of fluttery, middle-aged ladies to benefit teas and the like. It had taken a full hour of coaxing to get the car for the day, and Jack knew what would be the penalty if anything happened to mar its costly beauty. A scratch would be almost as much as his life was worth. He hoped dazedly that the fellows would keep their feet off the cushions, and that they would refrain from kicking the back seat.

Mrs. Singleton Corey was a large, firm woman who wore her white hair in a marcelled pompadour, and frequently managed to have a flattering picture of herself in the Sunday papers — on the Society-and-Club-Doings page, of course. She figured prominently in civic betterment movements, and was loud in her denunciation of Sunday dances and cabarets and the frivolities of Venice and lesser beach resorts. She did a lot of worrying over immodest bathing suits, and never went near the beach except as a member of a purity committee, to see how awfully young girls behaved in those public places.

She let Jack have the car only because she believed that he was going to take a party of young Christian Endeavorers up Mount Wilson to view the city after dark. She could readily apprehend that such a sight might be inspiring, and that it would act as a spur upon the worthy ambitions of the young men, urging them to great achievements. Mrs. Singleton Corey had plenty of enthusiasm for the betterment of young lives, but she had a humanly selfish regard for the immaculateness of her new automobile, and she feared that the roads on the mountain might be very dusty and rough, and that overhanging branches might snag the top. Jack had to promise that he would be very careful of overhanging branches.

Poor lady, she never dreamed that her son was out at Venice gamboling on the beach with bold hussies in striped bathing trunks and no skirts; fox-trotting with a brown-eyed imp from the telephone office, and drinking various bottled refreshments — carousing shamelessly, as she would have said of a neighbor's son — or that, at one-thirty in the morning, he was chewing a strong-flavored gum to kill the odor of alcohol.

She was not sitting up waiting for him and wondering why he did not come. Jack had been careful to impress upon her that the party might want to view the stars until very late, and that he, of course, could not hurry them down from the mountain top.

You will see then why Jack was burdened with a sense of deep responsibility for the car, and why he drove almost as circumspectly as if he were sober, and why he would not join in the hilarity of the party.

"Hist! Here comes a flivver!" warned the young man on the front seat, waving his revolver backward to impress silence on the others. "Let's *all* shoot! Make 'em think they've run into a mess of tacks!"

"Aw, take a wheel off their tin wagon!" a laughter-hoarse voice bettered the plan.

"Hold 'em up and take a nickel off 'em — if they carry that much on their persons after dark," another suggested.

"You're on, bo! This is a hold-up. Hist!"

A hold-up they proceeded to make it. They halted the little car with a series of explosions as it passed. The driver was alone, and as he climbed out to inspect his tires, he confronted what looked to his startled eyes like a dozen masked men. Solemnly they went through his pockets while he stood with his hands high above him. They took his half-plug of chewing tobacco and a ten-cent stick-pin from his tie, and afterwards made him crank his car and climb back into the seat and go on. He went — with the throttle wide open and the little car loping down the boulevard like a scared pup.

"Watch him went!" shrieked one they called Hen, doubling himself together in a spasm of laughter.

"'He was — here — when we *started,* b-but he was — gone — when we got th'ough!'" chanted another, crudely imitating a favorite black-faced comedian.

Jack, one arm thrown across the wheel, leaned out and looked back, grinning under the red band stretched across the middle of his face. "Ah, pile in!" he cried, squeezing his gum between his teeth and starting the engine. "He might come back with a cop."

That tickled them more than ever. They could hardly get back into the car for laughing. "S-o-m-e little bandits! — what?" they asked one another over and over again.

"S-o-m-e little bandits is — right!" the approving answer came promptly.

"S-o-m-e *time,* bo, s-o-m-e *time!*" a drink-solemn voice croaked in a corner of the big seat.

Thus did the party of Christian Endeavorers return sedately from their trip to Mount Wilson.

CHAPTER TWO

"THANKS FOR THE CAR"

THEY held up another car with two men in it, and robbed them of insignificant trifles in what they believed to be a most ludicrous manner. Afterward they enjoyed prolonged spasms of mirth, their cachinnations carrying far out over the flat lands disturbing inoffensive truck gardeners in their sleep. They cried "S-o-m-e time!" so often that the phrase struck even their fuddled brains as being silly.

They met another car — a large car with three women in the tonneau. These, evidently, were home-going theatre patrons who had indulged themselves in a supper afterwards. They were talking quietly as they came unsuspectingly up to the big, shiny machine that was traveling slowly townward, and they gave it no more than a glance as they passed.

Then came the explosion, that sounded surprisingly like a blowout. The driver stopped and got out to look for trouble, his companion at his heels. They confronted six masked men, three of them displaying six-shooters.

"Throw up your hands!" commanded a carefully disguised voice.

The driver obeyed — but his right hand came up with an automatic pistol in it. He fired straight into the bunch — foolishly, perhaps; at any rate harmlessly, though they heard the bullet sing as it went by. Startled, one of the six fired back impulsively, and the other two followed his example. Had they tried to kill, in the night and drunk as they were, they probably would have failed; but firing at random, one bullet struck flesh. The man with the automatic flinched backward, reeled forward drunkenly and went down slowly, his companion grasping futilely at his slipping body.

"Hey, you darn mutts, whatcha shootin' for? Hell of a josh, that is!" Jack shouted angrily and unguardedly. "Cut that out and pile in here!"

While the last man was clawing in through the door, Jack let in the clutch, slamming the gear-lever from low to high and skipping altogether the intermediate. The big car leaped forward and Hen bit his tongue so that it bled. Behind them was confused shouting.

"Better go back and help — what? You hit one," Jack suggested over his shoulder, slowing down as reason cooled his first hot impulse for flight.

"Go back *nothing!* And let 'em get our number? Nothing doing!"

"Aw, that mark that was with him took it. I saw him give it the once-over when he came back."

"He did not!" some one contradicted hotly. "He was too scared."

"Well, do we go back?" Jack was already edging the car to the right so that he would have room for a turn.

"No! Step on 'er! Let 'er out, why don't yuh? Damn it, what yuh killin' time for? Yuh trying to throw us down? Want that guy to call a cop and pinch the outfit? Fine pal you are! We've got to beat it while the beatin's good. Go on, Jack — that's a good boy. Step on 'er!"

With all that tumult of urging, Jack went on, panic again growing within him as the car picked up speed. The faster he went the faster he wanted to go. His foot pressed harder and harder on the accelerator. He glanced at the speedometer, saw it flirting with the figures forty-five, and sent that number off the dial and forced fifty and then sixty into sight. He rode the wheel, holding the great car true as a bullet down the black streak of boulevard that came sliding to meet him like a wide belt between whirring wheels.

The solemn voice that had croaked "S-o-m-e time!"

so frequently, took to monotonous, recriminating speech. "No-body home! No-body home! Had to spill the beans, you simps! Nobody home a-tall! Had to shoot a man — got us all in wrong, you simps! Nobody home!" He waggled his head and flapped his hands in drunken self-righteousness, because he had not possessed a gun and therefore could not have committed the blunder of shooting the man.

"Aw, can that stuff! You're as much to blame as anybody," snapped the man nearest him, and gave the croaker a vicious jab with his elbow.

"Don't believe that guy got hep to our number! Didn't have time," an optimist found courage to declare.

"What darn fool was it that shot first? Oughta be crowned for that!"

"Aw, the boob started it himself! He fired on us — and we were only joshing!"

"He got his, all right!"

"Don't believe we killed him — sure, he was more scared than hurt," put in the optimist dubiously.

"No-body home," croaked the solemn one again, having recovered his breath.

They wrangled dismally and unconvincingly together, but no one put into speech the fear that rode them hard. Fast as Jack drove, they kept urging him to "Step on 'er!" A bottle that had been circulating intermittently among the crowd was drained and thrown out on the boulevard, there to menace the tires of other travelers. The keen wind whipped their hot faces and cleared a little their fuddled senses, now that the bottle was empty. A glimmer of caution prompted Jack to drive around through Beverly Hills and into Sunset Boulevard, when he might have taken a shorter course home. It would be better, he thought, to come into town from another direction, even if it took them longer to reach home. He was careful to keep on a quiet residence street when he passed through Hollywood, and he turned at Vermont Avenue and drove out into Griffith Park, swung into a crossroad and came out on a road from Glendale. He made another turn or two, and finally slid into Los Angeles on the main road from Pasadena, well within the speed limit and with his heart beating a little nearer to normal.

"We've been to Mount Wilson, fellows. Don't forget that," he warned his passengers. "Stick to it. If they got our number back there we can bluff them into thinking they got it wrong. I'll let yuh out here and you can walk home. Mum's the word — get that?"

He had taken only a passive part in the egregious folly of their play, but they climbed out now without protest, subdued and willing to own his leadership.

Perhaps they realized suddenly that he was the soberest man of the lot. Only once had he drunk on the way home, and that sparingly, when the bottle had made the rounds. Like whipped schoolboys the six slunk off to their homes, and as they disappeared, Jack felt as though the full burden of the senseless crime had been dropped crushingly upon his shoulders.

He drove the big car quietly up the palm-shaded street to where his mother's wide-porched bungalow sprawled across two lots. He was sober now, for the tragedy had shocked him into clear thinking. He shivered when he turned in across the cement walk and slid slowly down the driveway to the garage. He climbed stiffly out, rolled the big doors shut, turned on the electric lights and then methodically switched off the lights of the car. He looked at the clock imbedded in the instrument board and saw that it lacked twenty minutes of three. It would soon be daylight. It seemed to him that there was a good deal to be done before daylight.

Preoccupiedly he took a big handful of waste and began to polish the hood and fenders of the car. His mother would want to drive, and she always made a fuss if he left any dust to dim its glossy splendor. He walked around behind and contemplated the number plate, wondering if the man who was said to be "hep" would remember that there were three ciphers together. He might see only two — being in a hurry and excited. He rubbed the plate thoughtfully, trying to guess just how that number, 170007, would look to a stranger who was excited by being shot at.

No use doctoring the number now. If the man had it, he had it — and it was easy enough to find the car that carried it. Easy enough, too, to prove who was in the car. Jack had named every one of the fellows who were to make up the party. He had to, before his mother would let him take the car. The names were just names to her — since she believed that they were Christian young men! — but she had insisted upon knowing who was going, and she would remember them. She had a memory like glue. She would also give the names to any officer that asked. Jack knew that well enough. For, besides having a memory that would never let go, Mrs. Singleton Corey had a conscience that was inexorable toward the faults of others. She would consider it her duty as a Christian woman and the president of the Purity League to hand those six young men over to the law. That she had been deceived as to their morals would add fire to her fervor.

Whether she would hand Jack over with them was a detail which did not greatly concern her son. He believed she would do it, if thereby she might win the plaudits of her world as a mother martyred to her fine sense of duty. Jack had lived with his mother for twenty-two years, and although he was very much afraid of her, he felt that he had no illusions concerning Mrs. Singleton Corey. He felt that she would sacrifice nearly everything to her greed for public approbation. Whether she would sacrifice her pride of family — twist it into a lofty pride of duty — he did not know. There are queer psychological quirks which may not be foreseen by youth.

Looking back on the whole sickening affair while he sat on the running board and smoked a cigarette, Jack could not see how his mother could consistently avoid laying him on the altar of justice. He had driven the party, and he had stopped the car for them to play their damnable joke. The law would call him an accomplice, he supposed. His mother could not save him, unless she pleaded well the excuse that he had been led astray by evil companions. In lesser crises, Jack remembered that she had played successfully that card. She might try it now. . . .

On the other hand, she might make a virtue of necessity and volunteer the information that he had in the first place lied about their destination. That, he supposed, would imply a premeditated plan of holding up automobiles. She might wash her hands of him altogether. He could see her doing that, too. He could, in fact, see Mrs. Singleton Corey doing several things that would work him ill and redound to her glory. What he could not see was a mother who would cling to him and cry over him and for him, and stick by him, just because she loved him.

"Aw, what's the use? It'll come out — it can't help it. The cops are out there smelling around now, I bet!"

He arose and worked over the car until it shone immaculately. A lifetime of continual nagging over little things, while the big things had been left to adjust themselves, had fixed upon Jack the habit of attending first to his mother's whims. Mrs. Singleton Corey made it a point to drive her own car. She liked the feeling of power that it gave her, and she loved the flattery of her friends. Therefore, even a murder problem must wait until her automobile was beautifully ready to back out of the garage into a critical world.

Jack gave a sigh of relief when he wiped his hands on the bunch of waste and tossed it into a tin can kept for that purpose. Time was precious to him just now. Any minute might bring the police. Jack did not feel that he was to blame for what had happened, but he realized keenly that he was "in wrong" just the same, and he had no intention of languishing heroically in jail if he could possibly keep out of it.

He hesitated, and finally he went to the house and let himself in through a window whose lock he had "doctored" months ago. His mother would not let him have a key. She believed that being compelled to ring the bell and awaken her put the needful check upon Jack's habits; that, in trailing downstairs in a silk kimono to receive him and his explanation of his lateness, she was fulfilling her duty as a mother.

Jack nearly always humored her in this delusion, and his explanations were always convincing. But he was not prepared to make any just now. He crawled into the sun parlor, took off his shoes and slipped down the hall and up the stairs to his room. There he rummaged through his closet and got out a khaki outing suit and hurried his person into it. In ten minutes he looked more like an overgrown boy scout than anything else. He took a cased trout rod and fly book, stuffed an extra shirt and all the socks he could find into his canvas creel, slung a pair of wading boots over his shoulder and tiptoed to the door.

There it occurred to him that it wouldn't be a bad idea to have some money. He went back to his discarded trousers, that lay in a heap on the floor, and by diligent search he collected two silver dollars and a few nickels and dimes and quarters — enough to total two dollars and eighty-five cents. He looked at the meagre fund ruefully, rubbed his free hand over his hair and was reminded of something else. His hair, wavy and trained to lie back from his forehead, made him easily remembered by strangers. He took his comb and dragged the whole heavy mop down over his eyebrows, and parted it in the middle and plastered it down upon his temples, trying to keep the wave out of it.

He looked different when he was through; and when he had pulled a prim, stiff-brimmed, leather-banded sombrero well down toward his nose, he could find the heart to grin at his reflection.

The money problem returned to torment him. Of what use was this preparation, unless he had some real money to use with it? He took off his shoes again, and his hat; pulled on his bathrobe over the khaki and went out and across to his mother's room.

Mrs. Singleton Corey had another illusion among her collection of illusions about herself. She believed that she was a very light sleeper; that the slightest noise woke her, and that she would then lie for hours wide-eyed. Indeed she frequently declared that she did her best mental work during "the sleepless hours of the night."

However that might be, she certainly was asleep when

Jack pushed open her door. She lay on her back with her mouth half open, and she was snoring rhythmically, emphatically — as one would hardly believe it possible for a Mrs. Singleton Corey to snore. Jack looked at her oddly, but his eyes went immediately to her dresser and the purse lying where she had carelessly laid it down on coming home from one of her quests for impurity which she might purify.

She had a little more than forty-two dollars in her purse, and Jack took all of it and went back to his room. There he issued a check to her for that amount — unwittingly overdrawing his balance at the bank to do so — and wrote this note to his mother:

"Dear Mother:

"I borrowed some money from you, and I am leaving this check to cover the amount. I am going on a fishing trip. Maybe to Mexico where dad made his stake. Thanks for the car today.

"Your son,
"JACK."

He took check and note to her room and placed them on her purse to the tune of her snoring, looked at her with a certain wistfulness for the mothering he had never received from her, and went away.

He climbed out of the house as he had climbed in, and cut across lots until he had reached a street some distance from his own neighborhood. Then keeping carefully in the shadows, he took the shortest route to the S. P. depot. An early car clanged toward him, but he waited in a dark spot until it had passed and then hurried on. He passed an all-night taxi stand in front of a hotel, but he did not disturb the sleepy drivers. So by walking every step of the way, he believed that he had reached the depot unnoticed, just when daylight was upon him with gray wreaths of fog.

By the depot clock it was five minutes to five. A train was being called, and the sing-song chant informed him that it was bound for "Sa-anta Bar-bra — Sa-an Louis Oh-bispo — Sa-linas — Sa-an 'Osay — Sa-an Fransisco, and a-a-ll points north!"

Jack, with his rubber boots flapping on his back, took a run and a slide to the ticket window and bought a ticket for San Francisco, thinking rather feverishly of the various points north.

CHAPTER THREE

TO THE FEATHER RIVER COUNTRY AND FREEDOM

IN the chair car, where he plumped himself into a seat just as the train began to creep forward, Jack pulled his hat down over his eyebrows and wondered if any one had recognized him while he was getting on the train. He could not tell, because he had not dared to seem anxious about it, and so had not looked around him. At any rate he had not been stopped, though the police could wire ahead and have him dragged off the train at any station they pleased. Panic once more caught him and he did not dare look up when the conductor came for his ticket, but held his breath until the gloomy, haggard-faced man had tagged him and passed on. Until the train had passed Newhall and was rattling across the flat country to the coast, he shivered when any one passed down the aisle.

Beyond San Francisco lay the fog bank of the unknown. With his fishing outfit he could pass unquestioned to any part of that mysterious, vague region known as Northern California. The Russian River country, Tahoe, Shasta Springs, Feather River — the names revolved teasingly through Jack's mind. He did not know anything about them, beyond the fact that they were places where fellows went for sport, and that he hoped people would think he went for sport also. His wading boots and his rod and creel would, he hoped, account for any haste he might betray in losing himself somewhere.

Lose himself he must. If he did not, if his mother got the chance to put him through the tearful third-degree system that women employ with such deadly certainty of success, Jack knew that he would tell all that he knew — perhaps more. The very least he could hope to reveal was the damning fact that he had not been to Mount Wilson that day. After that the rest would not need to be told. They could patch up the evidence easily enough.

He tried to forget that man slipping down in the embrace of his friend. It was too horrible to be true. It must have been a trick just to scare the boys. The world was full of joshers — Jack knew half a dozen men capable of playing that trick, just to turn the joke. For a few minutes he was optimistic, almost making himself believe that the man had not been shot, after all. The fading effect of the wines he had drunk sent his mood swinging from the depths of panicky anguish over the horrible affair, to a senseless optimism that refused to see disaster when it stood by his side.

He tried again to decide where he should go from San Francisco. He tried to remember all that he had ever heard about the various paradises for sportsmen, and he discovered that he could not remember anything except that they were all in the mountains, and that Tahoe was a big lake, and lots of people went there in the summer. He crossed Tahoe off the list, because he did not want to land in some fashionable resort and bump into some one he knew. Besides, thirty-one dollars would not last long at a summer resort — and he remembered he would not have thirty-one dollars when he landed; he would have what was left after he had paid his fare from San Francisco, and had eaten once or twice.

Straightway he became hungry, perhaps because a porter came down the aisle announcing the interesting fact that breakfast was now being served in the diner — fourth car rear. Jack felt as though he could eat about five dollars' worth of breakfast. He was only a month or so past twenty-two, remember, and he himself had not committed any crime save the crime of foolishness.

He slid farther down upon his spine, pulled his nice new sombrero lower on the bridge of his tanned nose, and tried to forget that back there in the diner they would give him grapefruit on ice, and after that rolled oats with thick yellow cream, and after that ham and eggs or a tenderloin steak or broiled squab on toast; and tried to remember only that the check would make five dollars look sick. He wished he knew how much the fare would be to some of those places where he meant to lose himself. With all that classy-looking paraphernalia he would not dare attempt to beat his way on a freight. He had a keen sense of relative values; dressed as he was he must keep "in the part." He must be able to show that he had money. He sighed heavily and turned his back definitely upon a dining-car breakfast. After that he went to sleep.

At noon he was awake and too ravenous to worry so much over the possibility of being arrested for complicity in a murder. He collided violently with the porter who came down the aisle announcing luncheon. He raced back through two chair cars and a tourist sleeper, and he entered the dining car with an emphasis that kept the screen door swinging for a full half minute. He tipped the waiter who came to fill his water glass, and told him to wake up and show some speed. Any waiter will wake up for half a dollar, these hard times. This one stood looking down over Jack's shoulder while he wrote, so that he was back with the boullion before Jack had reached the bottom of the order blank — which is the reason why you have not read anything about a certain young man dying of starvation while seated at table number five in a diner, somewhere in the neighborhood of Paso Robles.

When he returned to his place in the chair car he knew he must try to find out what isolated fishing country was closest. So he fraternized with the "peanut butcher," if you know who he is: the fellow who is put on trains to pester passengers to death with all sorts of readable and eatable indigestibles.

He bought two packages of gum and thereby won favor. Then, nonchalantly picking up his wading boots and placing them in a different position, he casually asked the boy how the fishing was, up this way. The peanut butcher balanced his tray of chewing gum and candy on the arm of a vacant chair beside Jack, and observed tentatively that it was fine, and that Jack must be going fishing. Jack confessed that such was his intention, and the vender of things-you-never-want made a shrewd guess at his destination.

"Going up into the Feather River country, I bet. Fellow I know just come back. Caught the limit, he claims. They say Lake Almanor has got the best fishing in the State, right now. Fellow I know seen a ten-pounder pulled outa there. He brought back one himself that tipped the scales at seven-and-a-half. He says a pound is about as small as they run up there. I'm going to try to get on the W. P. that runs up the canyon. Then some day I'll drop off and try my luck —"

"Don't run to Lake Almanor, does it? First I ever heard —"

"No, sure it don't! The lake's away off the railroad — thirty or forty miles. I don't look for a chance to go *there* fishing. I mean Feather River — anywhere along up the canyon. They say it's great. You can sure catch fish! Lots of little creeks coming down outa the canyon, and all of them full of trout. You'll have all kinds of sport."

"Aw, Russian River's the place to go," Jack dissented craftily, and got the reply that he was waiting for.

"Aw, what's the use of going away up there? And not get half the fish? Why, you can take the train at the ferry and in the morning you are right in the middle of the best fishing in the State. Buh-lieve *me,* it'll be Feather River for mine, if I can make the change I want to! Them that have got the money to travel on, can take the far-off places — me for the fish, bo, every day in the week." He took up his tray and went down the car, offering his wares to the bored, frowsy passengers who wanted only to reach journey's end.

The next round he made, he stopped again beside

Jack. They talked of fishing — Jack saw to that! — and Jack learned that Lake Almanor was nothing more nor less than an immense reservoir behind a great dam put in by a certain power company at a cost that seemed impossible. The reservoir had been made by the simple process of backing up the water over a large mountain valley. You could look across the lake and see Mount Lassen as plain as the nose on your face, the peanut butcher declared relishfully. And the trout in that artificial lake passed all belief.

Every time the boy passed, he stopped for a few remarks. Pound by pound the trout in Lake Almanor grew larger. Sentence by sentence Jack learned much that was useful, a little that was needful. There were several routes to Lake Almanor, for instance. One could get in by way of Chico, but the winter snow had not left the high summits, so that route was unfeasible for the time being. The best way just now was by the way of Quincy, a little town up near the head of Feather River Canyon. The fare was only seven or eight dollars, and since the season had opened one could get reduced rates for the round trip. That was the way the friend of the peanut butcher had gone in — only he had stopped off at Keddie and had gone up to the dam with a fellow he knew that worked there. And he had brought back a trout that weighed practically eight pounds, dressed. The peanut butcher knew; he had seen it with his own eyes. They had it hanging in the window of the California Market, and there was a crowd around the window all the time. He knew; he had seen the crowd, and he had seen the fish; and he knew the fellow who had caught it.

Unless he could go with a crowd, Jack did not care much about fishing. He liked the fun the gang could have together in the wilds, but that was all; like last summer when Hen had run into the hornet's nest hanging on a bush and thought it was an oriole's basket! Alone and weighed down with horror as he was, Jack could not stir up any enthusiasm for the sport. But he found out that it would not cost much to reach the little town called Quincy, of which he had never before heard.

No one, surely, would ever think of looking there for him. He could take the evening train out of San Francisco, and in the morning he would be there. And if he were not sufficiently lost in Quincy, he could take to the mountains all around. There were mountains, he guessed from what the boy had told him; and canyons and heavy timber. The thought of having some definite, attainable goal cheered him so much that he went to sleep again, sitting hunched down in the seat with his hat over his eyes, so that no one could see his face; and since no one but the man who sold it had ever seen him in that sport suit, he felt almost safe.

He left the train reluctantly at the big, new station in San Francisco, and took a street car to the ferry depot. There he kept out of sight behind a newspaper in the entrance to the waiting room until he was permitted to pass through the iron gate to the big, resounding room where passengers for the train ferry were herded together like corralled sheep. It seemed very quiet there, to be the terminal station in a large city.

Jack judged nervously that people did not flock to the best fishing in the State, in spite of all the peanut butcher had told him. He was glad of that, so long as he was not so alone as to be conspicuous. Aside from the thin sprinkling of passengers, everything was just as the boy had told him. He was ferried in a big, empty boat across the darkling bay to the train that stood backed down on the mole waiting for him and the half dozen other passengers. He chose the rear seat in another chair car very much like the one he had left, gave up his ticket and was tagged, pulled his hat down over his nose and slept again, stirring now and then because of his cramped legs.

When he awoke finally it was daylight, and the train was puffing into a tunnel. He could see the engine dive into the black hole, dragging the coaches after it like the tail of a snake. When they emerged, Jack looked down upon a green-and-white-scurrying river; away down — so far that it startled him a little. And he looked up steep pine-clad slopes to the rugged peaks of the mountains. He heaved a sigh of relief. Surely no one could possibly find him in a place like this.

After a while he was told to change for Quincy, and descended into a fresh, green-and-blue world edged with white clouds. There was no town — nothing but green hills and a deep-set, unbelievable valley floor marked off with fences, and a little yellow station with a red roof, and a toy engine panting importantly in front of its one tiny baggage-and-passenger coach, with a freight car for ballast.

Jack threw back his shoulders and took a long, deep, satisfying breath. He looked around him gloatingly and climbed into the little make-believe train, and smiled as he settled back in a seat. There was not another soul going to Quincy that morning, save the conductor and engineer. The conductor looked at his passenger as boredly as the wife of a professional humorist looks at her husband, took his ticket and left him.

Jack lighted a cigarette and blew the smoke out of the open window while the little train bore him down through the green forest into the valley. He was in a new world. He was safe here — he was lost.

CHAPTER FOUR

JACK FINDS HIMSELF IN POSSESSION OF A JOB

WRITING his name on the hotel register was an embarrassing ceremony that had not occurred to Jack until he walked up the steps and into the bare little office. Some instinct of pride made him shrink from taking a name that did not belong to him, and he was afraid to write his own in so public a place. So he ducked into the dining room whence came the muffled clatter of dishes and an odor of fried beefsteak, as a perfectly plausible means of dodging the issue for a while.

He ate as slowly as he dared and as long as he could swallow, and when he left was lucky enough to find the office occupied only by a big yellow cat curled up on the desk with the pen between its paws. It seemed a shame to disturb the cat. He went by it on his toes and passed on down the steps and into the full face of the town lying there cupped in green hills and with a sunshiny quiet that made the world seem farther away than ever.

A couple of men were walking down the street and stopping now and then to talk to those they met. Jack followed aimlessly, his hands in his pockets, his new Stetson — that did not look so unusual here in Quincy — pulled well down over his eyebrows and giving his face an unaccustomed look of purposefulness. Those he met carried letters and papers in their hands; those he followed went empty handed, so Jack guessed that he was observing the regular morning pilgrimage to the postoffice — which, had he only known it, really begins the day in Quincy.

He did not expect any mail, of course; but there seemed nothing else for him to do, no other place for him to go; and he was afraid that if he stayed around the hotel some one might ask him to register. He went, therefore, to the postoffice and stood just outside the door with his hands still in his pockets and the purposeful look on his face; whereas no man was ever more completely adrift and purposeless than was Jack Corey. Now that he had lost himself from the world — buried himself up here in these wonderfully green mountains where no one would ever think of looking for him — there seemed nothing at all to do. He did not even want to go fishing. And as for journeying on to that lake which the peanut butcher had talked so much about, Jack had never for one minute intended going there.

A tall man with shrewd blue eyes twinkling behind goldrimmed glasses came out and stood in the pleasant warmth of the sun. He had a lot of mail under his arm and a San Francisco paper spread before him. Jack slanted a glance or two toward the paper, and at the second glance he gulped.

"Los Angeles Auto Bandits Trailed" stared out at him accusingly like a pointed finger. Underneath, in smaller type, that was black as the meaning that it bore for him, were the words: "Sensational Developments Expected."

Jack did not dare look again, lest he betray to the shrewd eyes behind the glasses a guilty interest in the article. He took his cigarette from his mouth and moistened his lips, and tried to hide the trembling of his fingers by flicking off the ash. As soon as he dared he walked on down the street, and straightway found that he was walking himself out of town altogether. He turned his head and looked back, saw the tall man glancing after him, and went on briskly, with some effort holding himself back from running like a fool. He felt that he had blundered in coming down this way, where there was nothing but a blacksmith shop and a few small cottages set in trim lawns. The tall man would know that he had no business down here, and he would wonder who he was and what he was after. And once that tall man began to wonder. . . .

"Auto Bandits Trailed!" seemed to Jack to be painted on his back. That headline must mean him, because he did not believe that any of the others would think to get out of town before daylight as he had done. Probably that article had Jack's description in it.

He no longer felt that he had lost himself; instead, he felt trapped by the very mountains that five minutes ago had seemed so like a sheltering wall between him and his world. He wanted to get into the deepest forest that clothed their sides; he wanted to hide in some remote canyon.

He turned his head again and looked back. A man was coming behind him down the pathway which served as a pavement. He thought it was the tall man who had been reading about him in the paper, and again panic seized him — only now he had but his two feet to carry him away into safety, instead of his mother's big new car. He glanced at the houses like a harried animal seeking desperately for some hole to crawl into, and he saw that the little, square cottage that he had judged to be a dwelling, was in reality a United States Forest Service headquarters. He had only the haziest idea of what that meant, but at least it was a public office, and it had a door which he could close between himself and the man that followed.

He hurried up the walk laid across the neat little grass plot, sent a humbly grateful glance up to the stars-

and-stripes that fluttered lazily from the short flagstaff, and went in as though he had business there, and as though that business was urgent.

A couple of young fellows at wide, document-littered desks looked up at him with a mild curiosity, said good morning and waited with an air of expectancy for him to state his errand. Under pretense of throwing his cigarette outside, Jack turned and opened the door six inches or so. The man who had followed him was going past, and he did not look toward the house. He was busy reading a newspaper while he walked, but he was not the tall man with the shrewd blue eyes and the knowing little smile; which was some comfort to Jack. He closed the door and turned again toward the two; and because he knew he must furnish some plausible reason for his presence, he said the first thing that came to his tongue — the thing that is always permissible and always plausible.

"Fellow told me I might get a job here. How about it?" Then he smiled good-naturedly and with a secret admiration for his perfect aplomb in rising to the emergency.

"You'll have to ask Supervisor Ross about that," said one. "He's in there." He turned his thumb toward the rear room, the door of which stood wide open, and bent again over the map he had been studying. So far as these two were concerned, Jack had evidently ceased to exist. He went, therefore, to the room where the supervisor was at work filling in a blank of some kind; and because his impromptu speech had seemed to fill perfectly his requirements, he repeated it to Ross in exactly the same tone of careless good nature, except that this time he really meant part of it; because, when he came to think of it, he really did want a job of some sort, and the very atmosphere of quiet, unhurried efficiency that pervaded the place made him wish that he might become a part of it.

It was a vagrant wish that might have died as quickly as it had been born; an impulse that had no root in any previous consideration of the matter. But Ross leaned back in his chair and was regarding him seriously, as a possible employee of the government, and Jack instinctively squared his shoulders to meet the look.

Followed a few questions, which Jack answered as truthfully as he dared. Ross looked him over again and asked him how he would like to be a fireman. Whereat Jack looked bewildered.

“What I mean by that in this case,” the supervisor explained, “is that I could put you up on Mount Hough, in the lookout station. That’s — do you know anything at all about the Forest Service, young fellow?”

Jack blushed, gulped down a lie and came out with the truth. "I got in this morning," he said. "I don't know a darned thing about it, but I want to get to work at something. And I guess I can learn anything that isn't too complicated."

Ross laughed to himself. "About the most complicated thing you'll have to learn," he said, "is how to put in your time. It's hard to get a man that will stay at lookout stations. Lonesome — that's all. It's about as bad as being a sheepherder, only you won't have any sheep for company. Up on Mount Hough you'll have to live in a little glass house about the size of this room, and do your cooking on an oil stove. Your work will be watching your district for fires, and reporting them here — by phone. There's a man up there now, but he doesn't want to stay. He's been hollering for some one to take his place. You're entitled to four days relief a month — when we send up a man to take your place. Aside from that you'll have to stay right up on that peak, and watch for fires. The fellow up there will show you how to use the chart and locate fires so you can tell us exactly where it is that you see smoke. You can't leave except when you're given permission and some one comes to take your place. We send up your supplies and mail once a week on a pack horse. Your pay will be seventy dollars a month.

"I don't want you to take it unless you feel pretty sure you can stick. I'm tired of sending men up there for a week or two and having them phoning in here a dozen times a day about how lonesome it is, then quitting cold. We can't undertake to furnish you with amusement, and we are too busy to spend the day gossiping with you over the phone just to help you pass the time." He snapped his mouth together as though he meant every word of it and a great deal more. "Do you want the job?" he asked grimly.

Jack heard a chuckle from the next room, and his own lips came together with a snap.

"Lead me to it," he said cheerfully. "I'd stand on my head and point the wind with my legs for seventy dollars a month! Sounds to me like a good place to save money — what?"

"Don't know how you'd go about spending much as long as you stayed up there," Ross retorted drily. "It's when a man comes down that his wages begin to melt."

Jack considered this point, standing with his feet planted a little apart and his hands in his pockets, which is the accepted pose of the care-free scion of wealth who is about to distinguish himself. He believed that he knew best how to ward off suspicion of his motives in thus exiling himself to a mountain top. He therefore grinned amiably at Ross.

"Well, then, I won't come down," he stated calmly. "What I'm looking for is a chance to make some money without any chance of spending it. Lead me to this said mountain with the seventy-dollar job holding down the peak."

Ross looked at him dubiously as though he detected a false note somewhere. Good looking young fellows with the tangible air of the towns and easy living did not, as a rule, take kindly to living alone on some mountain peak. He stared up into Jack's face unwinkingly, seeking there the real purpose behind such easy acceptance.

Jack stared back, his eyes widening and sobering a little as he discovered that this man was not so easily put off with laughing evasion. He wondered if Ross had read the papers that morning, and if he, like the tall man at the postoffice, was mentally fitting him into the description of the auto bandit that was being trailed. Instinctively he rose to the new emergency.

"On the level, I want work and I want it right away," he said. "Being alone won't bother me — I always get along pretty well with myself. I want to get ahead of the game about five hundred dollars, and this looks to me like a good chance to pile up a few iron men. I'm game for the lonesomeness. It's a cold dollars-and-cents proposition with me." He stopped and eyed the other a minute. "Does that answer what's in your mind?" he asked bluntly.

Forest Supervisor Ross turned away his glance and reached for his pen. "That's all right," he half apologized. "I want you to understand what you're going up against, that is all. What's your name?"

Having the question launched at him suddenly like that, Jack nearly blurted out his own name from sheer force of habit. But his tongue was his friend for once and pronounced the last word so that Ross wrote "John Carew" without hesitation. And Jack Corey, glancing down as the supervisor wrote, stifled a smile of satisfaction.

"It happens to be the day when we usually send up supplies," said Ross when he had finished recording the fact of Jack's employment as fireman. "Our man hasn't started yet, and you can go up with him. Come back here in an hour, can you? There'll be a saddle horse for you. Don't try to take too much baggage. Suitcase, maybe. You can phone down for anything you need that you haven't got with you, you know. It will go up next trip. Clothes and grub and tobacco and such as that — use your own judgment and common sense."

"All right. Er — thank you, sir." Jack blushed a bit over the unaccustomed courtesy of his tone, and turned into the outer office.

"Oh — Carew! Don't fall into the fool habit of throwing rocks down into the lake just to see them bounce! One fellow did that, and came near getting a tourist. You'll have to be careful."

"I certainly will, Mr. Ross."

The other two men gave him a friendly nod, and Jack went out of the office feeling almost as cheerful as he had tried to appear.

CHAPTER FIVE

“IT’S A LONG WAY TO TIPPERARY,” SANG JACK

RIDING at a steady, climbing walk up a winding road cut into the wooded mountainside; with a pack-horse loaded with food and new, cheap bedding which Jack had bought; with chipmunks scurrying over the tree trunks that had gone crashing down in some storm and were gathering moss on their rotting bark; with the clear, yellow sunlight of a mountain day in spring lying soft on the upper branches, Jack had a queer sense of riding up into a new, untroubled life that could hold no shred of that from which he had fled. His mother, stately in her silks and a serenely unapproachable manner, which seemed always to say to her son that she was preoccupied with her own affairs, and that her affairs were vastly more important than his youthful interests and problems, swam vaguely before his consciousness, veiled by the swift passing of events and the abrupt change from city to unspoiled wilderness.

When his companion stopped to let the horses “get their wind,” Jack would turn in the saddle and look back over the network of gulches and deep canyons to where the valley peeped up at him shyly through the trees, and would think that every step made him that much safer. He did not face calmly the terror from which he had fled. Still mentally breathless from the very unexpectedness of the catastrophe, he shrank from the thought of it as if thinking would betray him. He had not so far concerned himself with his future, except as it held the possibility of discovery. So he quizzed his companion and got him talking about the mountains over which he was to play guardian angel.

He heard a good deal about hunting and fishing; and when they climbed a little higher, Hank Brown pointed out to him where a bear and two half grown cubs had been killed the fall before. He ought to have a rifle, said Hank. There was always the chance that he might get a shot at a bear; and as for deer, the woods were full of them. Then he told more stories and pointed out the very localities where the incidents had occurred.

"See that rocky peak over there? That's where the bears hole up in the winter. Network of caves, up there. King Solomon's the name the people that live here call it — but it's down on the map as Grizzly Peak. Ain't any grizzlies, though — black bear mostly. They're smaller and they ain't so fighty."

It was on the tip of Jack's tongue to observe that a man might hide out here for months and months and never be seen, much less caught; but he checked himself, and remarked only that he would certainly have to get a gun. He would like, he declared, to take home some good heads, and maybe a bear skin or two. He forced himself to speak of home in the careless tone of one who has nothing to hide, but the words left an ache in his throat and a dull heaviness in his chest.

Hank Brown went on talking and saw nothing wrong with his mood. Indeed, he never saw anything wrong with a man who would listen to Hank's hunting and fishing stories and not bore him with stories of his own prowess. Wherefore, Jack was left alone in peace to fight the sudden, nauseating wave of homesickness, and in a little while found himself listening to the steady monotone of Hank Brown's voice.

So, they came to a tiny, sunken meadow, one side of which was fenced with poles, rimmed round with hills set thick with heavy timber. On the farther side of the meadow, almost hidden from sight, was a square log cabin, solid, gloomily shaded and staring empty-eyed at a tiny, clear stream where the horses scared an eight-inch trout out of a pool when they lowered eager noses to drink thirstily.

After that they climbed up into a more open country, clothed with interlaced manzanita bushes and buck brush and thickets of young balsam fir. Here, said Hank Brown, was good bear country. And a little farther on he pulled up and pointed down to the dust of the trail, where he said a bear had crossed that morning. Jack saw the imprint of what looked like two ill-shaped short feet of a man walking barefooted — or perhaps two crude hands pressed into the dirt — and was thrilled into forgetfulness of his trouble.

Before they had gone another mile, he had bought Hank's rifle and all the cartridges he happened to have with him. He paid as much as a new rifle would have cost, but he did not know that — though he did know that he had scarcely enough money left in his pocket to jingle when the transaction was completed. He carried the rifle across the saddle in front of him and fingered the butt pridefully while his eyes went glancing here and there hopefully, looking for the bear that had crossed the trail that morning. The mere possession of the rifle bent his mood toward adventure rather than concealment. He did not think now of the lookout station as a refuge so much as a snug lair in the heart of a wonderful hunting ground.

He wanted to hear more about the bear and deer which Hank Brown had shot on these slopes. But Hank was no longer in the mood for recounting his adventures. Hank was congratulating himself upon selling that rifle, which had lately shown a tendency to jam if he worked the lever too fast; and was trying to decide just what make and calibre of rifle he would buy with the money now in his pocket; and he was grinning in his sleeve at the ease with which he had "stung" this young tenderfoot, who was unsuspectingly going up against a proposition which Hank, with all his love for the wild, would never attempt of his own free will.

At first sight, the odd little glass observatory, perched upon the very tip-top of all the wilderness around, fascinated Jack. He had never credited himself with a streak of idealism, nor even with an imagination, yet his pulse quickened when they topped the last steep slope and stood upon the peak of the world — this immediate, sunlit world.

The unconcealed joy on the face of the lookout when they arrived did not mean anything at all to him. He stood taking great breaths of the light, heady air that seemed to lift him above everything he had ever known and to place him a close neighbor of the clouds.

"This is great!" he said over and over, baring his head to the keen breeze that blew straight out of the violet tinted distance. "Believe me, fellows, this is simply *great!*"

Whereupon the fireman who had spent two weeks there looked at him and grinned.

"You can have it," he said with a queer inflection. "Mount Lassen's blowing off steam again. Look at her over there! She's sure on the peck, last day or so — you can have her for company. I donate her along with the sun-parlor and the oil stove and the telescope and the view. And I wish you all kinds of luck. How soon you going back, Hank? I guess I better be showing this fellow how to use the chart; maybe you'd like something to eat. I'm all packed and ready to hit the trail, myself."

In the center of the little square room, mounted on a high table, was a detail map of all the country within sight of the station — and that meant a good many miles of up and down scenery. Over it a slender pointer was fitted to a pin, in the center of the map, that let it move like a compass. And so cunningly was the chart drawn and placed upon the table that wherever one sighted along the pointer — as when pointing at a distant smudge of smoke in the valley or on the mountainside — there on the chart was the number by which that particular spot was designated.

"Now, you see, suppose there's a fire starts at Massack — or along in there," Ed, the lookout fireman, explained, pointing to a distant wrinkle in the bluish green distance, "you swing this pointer till it's drawing a bead on the smoke, and then you phone in the number of the section it picks up on the chart. The lookout on Claremont, he'll draw a bead on it too, and phone in *his* number — see? And where them two numbers intersect on the chart, there's your fire, boy."

Jack studied the chart like a boy investigating a new mechanical toy. He was so interested that he forgot himself and pushed his hair straight back off his forehead with the gesture that had become an unconscious mannerism, spoiling utterly the plastered effect which he had with so much pains given to his hair. But Hank and the fireman were neither suspicious nor observing, and only laughed at his exuberance, which they believed was going to die a violent death when Jack had spent a night or two there alone.

"Is *that* all I have to do?" he demanded, when he had located a half dozen imaginary fires.

"That's all you get paid for doing, but that ain't all you have to do, by a long shot!" the fireman retorted significantly. But he would not explain until he had packed his bed on the horse that had brought up Jack's bedding and the fresh supplies, and was ready to go down the mountain with Hank. Then he looked at Jack pityingly.

"Well — you sure have got my sympathy, kid. I wouldn't stay here another month for a thousand dollars. You've got your work cut out for you, just to keep from going crazy. So long."

Jack stood on a little jutting pinnacle of rock and watched them out of sight. He thought the great crater behind the station looked like a crude, unfinished cup of clay and rocks; and that Crystal Lake, reflecting the craggy slope from the deeps below, was like blueing in the bottom of the cup. He picked up a rock the size of his fist and drew back his arm for the throw, remembered what the supervisor had told him about throwing stones into the lake, and dropped the rock guiltily. It was queer how a fellow wanted to roll a rock down and shatter that unearthly blue mirror into a million ripples.

He looked away to the northwest, where Mount Lassen sent a lazy column of thin, grayish vapor trailing high into the air, and thought how little he had expected to see this much-talked-of volcano; how completely and irrevocably the past two days had changed his life. Why, this was only Tuesday! Day before yesterday he had been whooping along the beach at Venice, wading out and diving under the breakers just as they combed for the booming lunge against the sand cluttered with humanity at play. He had blandly expected to go on playing there whenever the mood and the bunch invited. Night before last he had danced — and he had drunk much wine, and had made impulsive love to a girl he had never seen in his life until just before he had held her in his arms as they went swaying and gliding and dipping together across the polished floor, carefree as the gulls outside on the sand. Night before last he had driven home — but he winced there, and pulled his thoughts back from that drive.

Here were no girls to listen to foolish speeches; no wine, no music, no boom of breakers, no gulls. There never would be any. He was as far from all that as though he had taken flight to the moon. There was no sound save the whispering rush of the wind that blew over the bare mountain top. He was above the pines and he could only faintly hear the murmur of their branches. Below him the world lay hushed, silent with the silence of far distances. The shadows that lay on the slope and far canyons moved like ghosts across the tumbled wilderness.

For a minute the immensity of silence and blue distance lulled his thoughts again with the feeling of security and peace. He breathed deep, his nostrils flared like a thoroughbred horse, his face turned this way and that, his eyes drinking deep, satisfying draughts of a beauty such as he had never before known. His lips were parted a little, half smiling at the wonderful kindness of fate, that had picked him up and set him away up here at the top o' the world.

He glanced downward, to his right. There went two objects — three, he counted them a moment later. He stepped inside, snatched up the telescope and focussed it eagerly on the slow-moving, black specks. Why, there went Hank Brown and the fireman, Ed somebody, and the pack horse with Ed's bedding lashed on its back. For perhaps a mile he watched them going down through the manzanita and buck brush toward the massed line of balsam firs that marked the nearest edge of the heavy timber line.

So that was the trail that led up to his eyrie! He marked it well, thinking that it might be a good plan to keep an eye on that trail, in case an officer came looking for him here.

He watched Hank and Ed go down into the balsam firs. Dark shadows crept after them down the slope to the edge of the thicket where they had disappeared.

He watched the shadows until they gave him a vague feeling of discomfort and loneliness. He turned away and looked down into the bottom of the mountain's cup. The lake lay darkling there, hooded with shadows like a nun, the snow banks at the edge indicating the band of white against the calm face. It looked cold and lonesome down there; terribly cold and lonesome.

Mount Lassen, when he sent a comfort-seeking glance that way, sent up a spurt of grayish black smoke with a vicious suddenness that made him jump. With bulging eyes he watched it mount higher and higher until he held his breath in fear that it would never stop. He saw the column halt and spread and fall. . . .

When it was over he became conscious of itching palms where his nails had dug into them and left little red marks. He discovered that he was shaking as with a nervous chill, and that his knees were bending under him. He sent a wild-eyed glance to the still, purple lake down there where the snowbanks lingered, though it was the middle of May; to the far hills that were purpling already with the dropping of the sun behind the high peaks; to the manzanita slope where the trail lay in shadow now. It was terribly still and empty — this piled wilderness.

He turned and hurried into his little glass-sided house and shut the door behind him. A red beam of the sinking sun shone in and laid a bar of light across the chart like a grin.

The silence was terrible. The emptiness pressed upon him like a weight that crushed from him his youth and his strength and all his youthful optimism, and left him old and weak and faded, a shadow of humanity like those shadows down there in the canyon.

Stealthily, as if he were afraid of some tangible shape reaching out of the silence, his hand went to the telephone receiver. He clutched it as drowning fingers clutch at seaweed. He leaned and jerked the receiver to his ear, and waited for the human voice that would bring him once more into the world of men. He did not know then that the telephone was the kind that must be rung by the user; or if he had been told that he had forgotten. So he waited, his ears strained to catch the heavenly sound of a human voice.

Shame crept in on the panic of his soul; shame and something that stiffened it into the courage of a man. He felt his cheeks burn with the flush that stained them, and he slowly lowered the receiver into its hook.

With his hands thrust deep into his pockets and his mouth pulled down at the corners, he stood leaning back against the desk shelf and forced himself to look down across the wooded slopes to the valley, where a light twinkled now like a fallen star. After a while he found that he could see once more the beauty, and not so much the loneliness. Then, just to prove to himself that he was not going to be bluffed by the silence, he began to whistle. And the tune carried with it an impish streak of that grim humor in which, so they tell us, the song was born. It is completely out of date now, that song, but then it was being sung around the world. And sometimes it was whistled just as Jack was whistling it now, to brace a man's courage against the press of circumstances.

"It's a long way to Tipperary," sang Jack, when he had whistled the chorus twice; and grinned at the joke upon himself. After that he began to fuss with the oil stove and to experiment with the food they had left him, and whistled deliberately all the while.

In this wise Jack Corey lost himself from his world and entered into his exile on a mountain top.

CHAPTER SIX

MISS ROSE FORWARD

TIMES were none too prosperous with the Martha Washington Beauty Shop, upon the sixth floor of a Broadway building. In the hairdressing parlor half the long rows of chairs reached out empty arms except during the rush hours of afternoon; even then impatient patrons merely sprinkled the room with little oases of activity while the girls busied themselves with tidying shelves already immaculate, and prinking before the mirrors whenever they dared. An air of uncertainty pervaded the place, swept in by the rumor that the shop was going to cut down its force of operators. No one knew, of course, the exact truth of the matter, but that made it all the worse.

"'For one shall be taken and the other left,'" a blonde girl quoted into a dismal little group at the window that looked out over the city. "Has any one heard any more about it?"

"Rumley has been checking up the appointment lists, all morning," a short, fat girl with henna-auburn hair piled high on her head reported cheerfully. "Of course, you could never get a word out of *her* — but I know what she is up to. The girls that have the most steady patrons will stay, of course. I'm certainly glad I kidded that old widow into thinking she's puhfectly stunning with her hair hennaed. She don't trust anybody but me to touch it up. And she's good for a scalp and facial and manicure every week of her life, besides getting her hair dressed every Saturday anyway, and sometimes oftener when she's going out. And she *always* has a marcelle after a shampoo. She'd quit coming if I left — she told me so last week. She thinks I'm *there* on massages. And then I've got sevrul others that ask for me regular as they come in. You know that big, fat —"

"Miss Rose forward," the foreman's crisp, businesslike voice interrupted.

Miss Rose began nervously pulling her corn-colored hair into the latest plastered effect on her temples. "This isn't any appointment. I wonder if somebody asked for me, or if Rumley —"

"Well, kid her along, whoever she is, and talk a lot about her good points. You never can tell when some old girl is going to pull a lot of patronage your way," the fat girl advised practically. "Tell 'em your name and suggest that they call for you next time. You've got to get wise to the trick of holding what you get.

Beat it, kiddo — being slow won't help you none with Rumley, and she's got the axe, remember."

Thus adjured, Miss Rose beat it, arriving rather breathlessly at her chair, which was occupied by a rather sprightly looking woman with pretty hands and a square jaw and hair just beginning to gray over the temples. She had her hat off and was regarding herself seriously in the mirror, wondering whether she should touch up the gray, as some of her intimate friends advised, or let it alone as her brother Fred insisted.

Miss Rose was too busy counting customers to notice who was in her chair until she had come close.

"Why, hello, Kate," she said then. "I was just wondering what had become of you."

"Oh, I've been so busy, Marion. I just had to *steal* the time today to come. You weren't out to my reading last night, and I was afraid you might not be well. Do you think that I ought to touch up my hair, Marion? Of course, I don't mind it turning, so much — but you know appearance counts *everything* with an audience until one begins to speak. Fred says to leave it alone —"

"Well, you do it." Miss Rose leaned over the chair with a handful of hairpins to place in the little box on the dressing shelf, and spoke confidentially in the ear of her patron. "It's not my business to knock the trade, Kate — but honestly, that sign up there, that says 'Hair Dyed at Your Own Risk' ought to say, 'to your own sorrow.' If you start, you've got to keep it up or it looks simply frightful. And if you keep it up it just ruins your hair. You have such *nice* hair, Kate!" She picked up a sterilized brush and began stroking Kate's hair soothingly. It was not such nice hair. It was very ordinary hair of a somewhat nondescript color; but Kate was her dearest friend, and praise is a part of the profession. "What do you want? — a scalp, shampoo, or just dressed, or a curl, or what?"

"What," Kate retorted pertly. "Just fuss around while I talk to you, Marion. I —"

"Rumley won't stand for fussing. I've got to do something she can recognize across the room. How about a scalp? You can talk while I massage, and then I'll show you a perfectly stunning way to do your hair — it's new, and awfully good for your type of face. How do you like mine today?"

"Why, I like it tremendously!" Kate gave her an appraising glance in the mirror. "It's something new, isn't it? Use plenty of tonic, won't you, Marion? They charge awful prices here — but their tonic has done my hair *so* much good! Listen, could you get off early today? I simply must talk to you. A perfectly tremendous opportunity has literally fallen our way, and I want you to benefit by it also. A friend of Douglas'— of Professor Harrison's, I should say — called our attention to it. This friend wants to go in on it, but he can't leave his business; so the idea is to have just Fred and the professor — and you, if you'll go — and me to go and attend to the assessments. All the other names will be dummy names — well, silent partners is a better word — and we can control a tremendously valuable tract that way. How about a henna rinse, Marion? Would it be worth while?"

"Why, a henna rinse would brighten your hair, Kate — and lots of nice women have them. But you'll have to have a shampoo, you know. The henna rinse is used with a shampoo. I believe I'd have one if I were you, Kate. You never could tell it in the world. And it's good for the hair, too. It —"

"Fred is *so* disagreeable about such things. But if it couldn't be told —" Kate began to doubt again. "Does it cost extra?"

"Fifty cents — but it does brighten the hair. It brings out the natural color — there is an auburn tint —"

"But I really meant to have a manicure today. And we can't talk in the manicure parlor — those tables are crowded together so! I've a tremendous lot to tell you, too. Which would you have, Marion?"

Miss Rose dutifully considered the matter while she continued the scalp massage. Before they had decided definitely upon the extravagance of a henna rinse, which was only a timid sort of experiment and at best a mere compromise art and nature, Marion had applied the tonic. It seemed a shame to waste that now with a shampoo, and she did not dare to go for another dish of the tonic; so Kate sighed and consoled herself with a dollar saved, and went without the manicure also.

Rather incoherently she returned to her subject, but she did not succeed in giving Miss Rose anything more than a confused idea of a trip somewhere that would really be an outing, and a tremendous opportunity to make thousands of dollars with very little effort. This sounded alluring. Marion mentally cancelled a date with a party going to Venice that evening, and agreed to meet Kate at six o'clock, and hear more about it.

In the candy shop where they ate, her mind was even more receptive to tremendous opportunities for acquiring comparative wealth with practically no initial expense and no effort whatever. Not being subjected to the distraction of a beauty parlor, Kate forgot to use her carefully modulated, elocutionary voice, and buzzed with details.

"It's away up in the northern part of the State somewhere, in the mountains. You know timber land is going to be tremendously valuable — it is now, in fact. And this tract of beautiful big trees can be gotten and flumed — or something — down to a railroad that taps the country. It's in Forest Reserve, you see, and can't be bought by the lumber companies. I had the professor explain it all to me again, after I left the Martha, so I could tell you.

"A few of us can club together and take mining claims on the land — twenty acres apiece. All we have to do is a hundred dollars' worth of work — just digging holes around on it, or something — every year till five hundred dollars' worth is done. Then we can get our deed — or whatever it is — and sell the timber."

"Well, *what* do you know about *that!*" Marion exclaimed ecstatically, leaning forward across the little table with her hands clasped. Nature had given her a much nicer voice than Kate's, and the trite phrase acquired a pretty distinctiveness just from the way she said it. "But — would you have to stay five years, Kate?" she added dubiously.

"No, that's the beauty of it, you can do all the five hundred dollars' worth in one year, Marion."

"Five hundred dollars' worth of digging holes in the ground!" Marion gasped, giggling a little. "Good night!"

"Now please wait until you hear the rest of it!" Kate's tone sharpened a little with impatience. She moved a petulant elbow while a tired waitress placed two glasses of water and a tiny plate of white and brown bread upon the table. The minute the girl's back was turned upon them she cast a cautious eye around the clattering throng and leaned forward.

"Four men — men with a little capital — are going into it, and pay Fred and the professor for doing their assessment work. Four five-hundreds will make two thousand dollars that we'll get out of them, just for looking after their interests. And we'll have our twenty acres apiece of timber — and you've no *idea* what a tremendous lot of money that will bring, considering the investment. Fred's worked so hard lately that he's all run down and looks miserable. The doctor told him the mountains would do him a world of good. And the professor wants to do something definite and practical — they are filling up the college with student-teachers, willing to teach some certain subject for the instruction they'll get in some other — and they're talking about cutting the professor's salary. He says he will not endure another cut — he simply cannot, and —"

"And support an elocutionist?"

"Now, hush! It isn't —"

"Do I draw any salary as chaperone, Kate?"

"Now, if you don't stop, I'll not tell you another thing!" Kate took a sip of water to help hide a little confusion, clutching mentally at the practical details of the scheme. "Where was I?"

"Cutting Doug's salary. Is it up on a mountain, or up in the State, that you said the place was? I'd like being on a mountain, I believe — did you ever see such hot nights as we're having?"

"It's up both," Kate stated briefly. "You'd love it, Marion. There's a log house, and right beside it is a trout stream. And it's only six miles from the railroad, and *good* road up past the place. A man who has been up there told Doug — the professor. Tourists just *flock* in there. And right up on top of the mountain, within walking distance of our claims, is a lake, Marion! And great trout in it, that long! — you can see them swimming all around in schools, the water is so clear. And there is no inlet or outlet, and no bottom. The water is just as clear and as blue as the sky, the man told the professor. It's so clear that they actually call it Crystal Lake!"

"Well, *what* do you know about that!" breathlessly murmured Marion in her crooning voice. "A lake like that on top of a mountain — in weather like this, doesn't it sound like heaven?" She began to pick the pineapple out of her fruit salad, dabbing each morsel in the tiny mound of whipped cream.

"We'd need some outing clothes, of course. I've been thinking that a couple of plain khaki suits — you know — and these leggings that lace down the side, would be all we'd really need. I wish you'd go out home with me instead of going to a show. Fred will be home, and he can explain the details of this thing better than I can. If it were a difficult stanza of Browning, now — but I haven't much talent for business. And seriously, Marion, you must know all about this before you really say yes or no. And it's time you had some real object in life — time you settled down to regard your life seriously. I love you just the way you are, dear, but for your own sake you must learn to think for yourself and not act so much upon impulse. I couldn't bear to go off without you, and stay a whole year, maybe — but if you should go, not knowing just what it was going to be like, and then be disappointed — you see, dear, you might come to blaming poor Kate."

"Why, I wouldn't do anything of the kind! Even if it did turn out to be something I didn't care for, it would be so much better than staying here with you gone, that I don't see how I could mind very much. You know, Kate, I'm just crazy about the country. I'd like to sleep right outside! And I think a log cabin is the dearest way to live — don't you? And we'd hike, wouldn't we? — up to the lake and all around. I've got enough money to buy a gun, and if there's any hunting around there, we'll hunt! Kate, down in my heart I'm sick of massaging old ladies' double chins and kidding them into thinking they look young! And anyway," she added straightforwardly, "I don't suppose I'll be at the Martha much longer. They're going to let a lot of us girls out, and I'm almost sure to be one of them. There's enough of the older girls to do all the work there is now, till the tourist season begins again in the fall. I couldn't get in anywhere else, this time of the year, so I'd just about have to go out to one of the beaches and get a little tent house or something with some of the girls, and fool around until something opened up in the fall. And even if you live in your bathing suit all day, Kate, you just can't get by without spending a little money."

"Well, of course, you'd stay with me if I were here. I wouldn't hear to anything else. And even — why don't you come on out anyway, till we get ready to start? We could plan so much better. And don't you think, Marion, it would be much better for you if you didn't wait for the Martha to let you go but gave them notice instead?"

"Quit before I'm invited to leave? I believe I'd better do that, Kate. It won't be half bad to spring it on the girls that I'm going up in the mountains for the summer. I'll talk about that lake till — say, I'm just wild to start. How soon do you think it will be? Fred will have to teach me how to trout-fish — or whatever you call it. Only think of stepping out of our log cabin and catching trout, just any time you want to! And, Kate, I really am going to buy a gun. Down on Spring, in that sporting-goods house — you know, the one on the corner — they have got the cutest rifles! And by the way, they had some of the best looking outing suits in the window the other day. I'm going in there when I come down in the morning."

"Let Fred advise you about the rifle before you buy. Fred's tremendously clever about nature stuff, Marion. He'll know just what you want. I think a gun will maybe be necessary. You know there are bear —"

"Oh, good night!" cried Marion. But in the next breath she added, "I wonder if there are any nice hunters after the bears!"

CHAPTER SEVEN

GUARDIAN OF THE FORESTS

IN mid July the pines and spruces and firs have lost their pale green fingertips which they wave to the world in spring, and have settled down to the placid business of growing new cones that shall bear the seed of future forests as stately as these. On the shadowed, needle-carpeted slopes there is always a whispery kind of calm; the calm of Nature moving quietly about her appointed tasks, without haste and without uncertainty, untorn by doubts or fears or futile questioning; like a broad-souled, deep-bosomed mother contentedly rearing her young in a sheltered home where love abides in the peace which passeth understanding.

Gray squirrels, sleek and bright-eyed and graceful always, lope over the brown needles, intent upon some urgent business of their own. Noisy little chipmunks sit up and nibble nervously at dainties they have found, and flirt their tails and gossip, and scold the carping bluejays that peer down from overhanging branches. Perhaps a hoot owl in the hollow trees overhead opens amber eyes and blinks irritatedly at the chattering, then wriggles his head farther down into his feathers, stretches a leg and a wing and settles himself for another nap.

Little streams go sliding down between banks of bright green grass, and fuss over the mossy rocks that lie in their beds. Deer lift heads often to listen and look and sniff the breeze between mouthfuls of the tender twigs they love. Shambling, slack-jointed bears move shuffling through the thickets, like the deer, lifting suspicious noses to test frequently the wind, lest some enemy steal upon them unaware.

From his glass-walled eyrie, Jack Corey gazed down upon the wooded slopes and dreamed of what they hid of beauty and menace and calm and of loneliness. He saw them once drenched with rain; but mostly they lay warm under the hot sunshine of summer. He saw them darkling with night shadows, he saw them silvered with morning fogs which turned rose tinted with the first rays of sunrise, he saw them lie soft-shaded in the sunset's after glow, saw them held in the unearthly beauty of the full moonlight.

Like the deer and the bear down there, his head was lifted often to look and to sniff the wind that blew strongly over the peak. For now the winds came too often tainted with the smoke of burning pines. The blue haze of the far distance deepened with the thickening air. Four times in the last ten days he had swung the pointer over the mapped table and sighted it upon brown puffballs that rose over the treetops — the first betraying marks of the licking flames below. He had watched the puff balls grow until they exploded into rolling clouds of smoke, yellow where the flames mounted high in some dead pine or into a cedar, black where a pitch stump took fire.

After he had telephoned the alarm to headquarters he would watch anxiously the spreading pall. To stand up there helpless while great trees that had been a hundred years or more in the growing died the death of fire, gave him a tragic feeling of having somehow betrayed his trust. Every pine that fell, whether by old age, fire or the woodmen's axe, touched him with a sense of personal loss. It was as though he himself had made the hills and clothed them with the majestic trees, and now stood godlike above, watching lest evil come upon them. But he did not feel godlike when through the telescope he watched great leaping flames go climbing up some giant pine, eating away its very life as they climbed; he was filled then with a blind, helpless rage at his own ineffectiveness, and he would stand and wonder why God refused to send the rain that would save these wonderful, living things, the trees.

At night, when the forests drew back into the darkness, he would watch the stars slide across the terrible depth of purple infinity that seemed to deepen hypnotically as he stared out into it. Venus, Mars, Jupiter — at first he could not tell one from another, though he watched them all. He had studied astronomy among other things in school, but then it had been merely a hated task to be shirked and slighted and forgotten as one's palate forgets the taste of bitter medicine. Up here, with the stars all around him and above him for many nights, he was ashamed because he could not call them all by name. He would train his telescope upon some particularly bright star and watch it and wonder — Jack did a great deal of wondering in those days, after his first panicky fight against the loneliness and silence had spent itself.

First of all, he awoke to the fact that he was about as important to the world as one of those little brown birds that hopped among the rocks and perked its head at him so knowingly, and preened its feathers with such a funny air of consequence. He could not even believe that his sudden disappearance had caused his mother any grief beyond her humiliation over the manner and the cause of his going. She would hire some one to take care of the car, and she would go to her teas and her club meetings and her formal receptions and to church just the same as though he were there — or had never been there. If he ever went back. . . . But he never could go back. He never could face his mother again, and listen to her calmly-condemnatory lectures that had no love to warm them or to give them the sweet tang of motherly scolding.

It sounds a strange thing to say of Jack Corey, that scattered-brained young fellow addicted to beach dancing and joy rides and all that goes with these essentially frothy pastimes; a strange thing to say of him that he was falling into a more affectionate attitude of personal nearness to the stars and to the mountains spread out below him than he had ever felt toward Mrs. Singleton Corey. Yet that is how he managed to live through the lonely days he spent up there in the lookout station.

When Hank was about to start with another load of supplies up the mountain, Jack had phoned down for all of the newspapers, magazines and novels which Forest Supervisor Ross could buy or borrow; also a double supply of smoking tobacco and a box of gum. When his tongue smarted from too much smoking, he would chew gum for comfort. And he read and read, until his eyes prickled and the print blurred. But the next week he diffidently asked Ross if he thought he could get him a book on astronomy, explaining rather shamefacedly that there was something he wanted to look up. On his third trip Hank carried several government pamphlets on forestry. Which goes to prove how Jack was slowly adapting himself to his changed circumstances, and fitting himself into his surroundings.

He had to do that or go all warped and wrong, for he had no intention of leaving the peak, which was at once a refuge and a place where he could accumulate money; not much money, according to Jack's standard of reckoning — his mother had often spent as much for a gown or a ring as he could earn if he stayed all summer — but enough to help him out of the country if he saved it all.

When his first four days vacation was offered him, Jack thought a long while over the manner of spending it. Quincy did not offer much in the way of diversion, though it did offer something in the way of risk. So he cut Quincy out of his calculations and decided that he would phone down for a camp outfit and grub, and visit one or two of the places that he had been looking at for so long. For one thing, he could climb down to the lake he had been staring into for nearly a month, and see if he could catch any trout. Occasionally he had seen fishermen down there casting their lines in, but none of them had seemed to have much luck. For all that the lake lured him, it was so blue and clear, set away down there in the cupped mountain top. Hank had advised him to bait with a salmon-roe on a Coachman fly. Jack had never heard of that combination, and he wanted to try it.

But after all, the lake was too near to appeal to him except by way of passing. Away on the next ridge was the black, rocky hump called Grizzly Peak on the map. Hank spoke of it casually as Taylor Rock, and sometimes called it King Solomon. That was where the bears had their winter quarters, and that was where Jack wanted to go and camp. He wanted to see a bear's den, and if the bears were all gone — Hank assured him that they never hung out up there in the summer, but ranged all over the mountains — he wanted to go inside a den and see what it was like. And for a particular, definite ambition, without which all effort is purposeless, he wanted to kill a bear.

Hank brought him all the things he needed, talked incessantly of what Jack should do and what he shouldn't do, and even offered to pack his outfit over to the Peak for him. So Jack went, and got his first taste of real camping out in a real wilderness, and gained a more intimate knowledge of the country he had to guard.

By the time his second relief was at hand, he was tempted to take what money he had earned and go as far as it would take him. He did not believe he could stand another month of that terrible isolation, even with his new friendliness toward the stars and the forest to lighten a little of his loneliness. Youth hungers for a warmer, more personal companionship than Nature, and Jack was never meant for a hermit. He grew sullen. He would stand upon his pinnacle where he could look down at Crystal Lake, and hate the tourists who came with lunches and their fishing tackle, and scrambled over the rocks, and called shrilly to one another, and laughed, and tried to invent new ways of stringing together adjectives that seemed to express their enthusiasm. He would make biting remarks to them which the distance prevented their hearing, and he would wish savagely that they would fall in the lake, or break a leg on some of the boulders.

When those with a surplus of energy started up the steep climb to the peak, he would hurry into his little glass room, hastily part and plaster his hair down as a precaution against possible recognition, and lock his door and retire to a certain niche in a certain pile of rocks, where he would be out of sight and yet be close enough to hear the telephone, and would chew gum furiously and mutter savage things under his breath. Much as he hungered for companionship he had a perverse dread of meeting those exclamatory sightseers.

It seemed to Jack that they cheapened the beauty of everything they exclaimed over.

He could hear them gabble about Mount Lassen, and his lip would curl with scorn over the weakness of their metaphors. He would grind his teeth when they called his glass prison "cute," and wondered if anybody really lived there. He would hear some man trying to explain what he did not know anything at all about, and he would grin pityingly at the ignorance of the human male, forgetting that he had been just as ignorant, before fate picked him up and shoved him head-foremost into a place where he had to learn.

Sometimes he was not forewarned of their visits, and would be trapped fairly; and then he would have to answer their foolish questions and show them what the map was for, and what the pointer was for, and admit that it did get lonesome sometimes, and agree with them that it was a fine view, and point out where Quincy lay, and all the rest of it. It amazed him how every one who came said practically the same things, asked the same questions, linked the same adjectives together.

Thus passed his second month, which might be called his pessimistic month. But he did not take his money and go. He decided that he would wait until he had grown a beard before he ventured. He realized bitterly that he was a fugitive, and that it would go hard with him now if he were caught. From the papers which Supervisor Ross had sent him every week he had learned that the police were actually and definitely looking for him. At least they had been a month ago, and he supposed that they had not given up the search, even though later events had pushed his disgrace out of print. The man they had shot was hovering close to death in a hospital, the last Jack read of the case. It certainly would be wiser to wait a while. So he took his camp outfit to Taylor Rock again and stayed there until his four days were gone.

That time he killed a deer and got a shot at a young bear, and came back to his post in a fairly good humor. The little glass room had a homey look, with the late afternoon sunlight lying warm upon the map and his piles of magazines and papers stacked neatly on their shelf. Since he could not be where he wanted to be, Jack felt that he would rather be here than anywhere else. So his third month began with a bleak kind of content.

CHAPTER EIGHT

IN WHICH A GIRL PLAYS BILLIARDS ON THE MOUNTAIN TOP

JACK heard some one coming, snatched up a magazine and his pipe and promptly retired to his pet crevice in the rocks. Usually he locked the door before he went, but the climber sounded close — just over the peak of the last little knob, in fact. He pulled the door shut and ran, muttering something about darned tourists. Drive a man crazy, they would, if he were fool enough to stay and listen to their fool talk.

He crawled well back into the niche, settled himself comfortably and lighted his pipe. They never came over his way — and the wind blew from the station. He did not believe they would smell the smoke.

Darn it all, he had the wrong magazine! He half rose, meaning to scurry back and get the one he wanted; but it was too late now. He heard the pebbles knocked loose where the faint trail dipped down over the knob directly behind the station. So he settled back with his pipe for solace, and scowled down at the world, and waited for the darn tourists to go.

But this particular darn tourist had two reasons for lingering up there. Her first and greatest reason was a sheer delight in the panorama spread below and all around her, and the desire to saturate her soul with the beauty of it, her lungs with the keen elixir of the wind, heady with the eight thousand feet of altitude. Her second reason was a perverse desire to show Kate that she was not to be bossed around like a kid, and dictated to and advised and lectured whenever she wanted to do something which Kate did not want to do. Why, for instance, should she miss the pleasure of climbing to the very top of the peak just because Kate began to puff before they were half way up, and wanted to turn back?

Of course, she would do anything in the world for Kate; but that was no reason why Kate should be selfish about little things. If she didn't want to wait until Marion came down, she could walk home alone. There was a good road, and Marion certainly would never think of objecting. She believed in absolute personal liberty in little things. Therefore she meant to stay up on the peak just exactly as long as she wanted t stay, regardless of what Kate wanted to do. She had not tried to force Kate to come up with her — if Kate would just stop to think a minute. When Kate sat down on that rock and said she wouldn't climb another step, Marion had not urged her at all. She had waited until she was sure that Kate would not change her mind, and then she had come on up without any fuss or argument. And she would stay until she was ready to go down. It would be silly to spoil her pleasure now by worrying. She would like to see a sunset from up here. She had her gun with her, and anyway, she could get home easily before dark. She believed she would stay, just this once. Really, it would do Kate good to discover that Marion liked to please herself once in a while.

Which was all very well for Marion Rose, but rather hard on Jack, who was not in a mood for company. He smoked hopefully for a half hour or so. Most tourists got enough of it in a half hour. They began to feel the altitude then, or found the wind disagreeable, or they were in a hurry to climb down to the lake and fish, or they had to think about the trip home. Besides, their vocabularies were generally exhausted in half an hour, and without superlatives they could not gaze upon the "view"; not with any satisfaction, that is. But this tourist could be heard moving here and there among the rocks, with long lapses of silence when she just stood and gazed. Jack listened and waited, and grew more peevish as the lagging minutes passed. If he went out now, he would have to go through the whole performance.

The telephone rang. And while Jack was sulkily getting to his feet, he heard a girl's voice answering the phone. The nerve of her! What business had she inside, anyway? Must a fellow padlock that door every time he went out, to keep folks from going where they had no business to be? He went angrily to the station; much more angrily than was reasonable, considering the offense committed against him.

He saw a girl in a short khaki skirt and high laced boots and a pongee blouse belted trimly with leather, bending her head over the mouthpiece of the telephone. She had on a beach hat that carried the full flavor of Venice in texture and tilt, and her hair was a ripe corn color, slicked back from her temples in the fashion of the month. Graceful and young she was, groomed as though thousands were to look upon her. Normally Jack's eyes would have brightened at this sight, his lips would have curved enticingly, his voice would have taken the tone of incipient philandering. But in his present mood he snapped at her.

"I beg your pardon. This is not a public telephone booth. It's a private office."

She glanced inattentively his way, her smile directed mentally toward the person on the other end of the wire. With her free hand she waved him to silence and spoke, still smiling, into the mouthpiece.

"You're sure I won't do? I believe I could qualify, and I want —"

"If you please, this is not a public —"

But she waved her hand again impatiently and listened, engrossed and smiling. "Oh, just because I wanted to hear a human voice, I guess. I'd forgotten what a phone looks like, and so when I heard . . . No, I am not a tourist. I'm a neighbor, and I'm the lonesomest neighbor in these mountains. . . . What? . . . Oh, down the road in a spooky little valley where there's a log cabin and a trout stream — only I haven't caught any yet. They bite, but they simply *won't* stay hooked. What? . . . Oh, just worms, and those fuzzy flies made with a hook on them — *you* know. . . . Oh, thanks! I surely do wish you could. . . . The what? . . . Oh! well, I don't know, I'm sure. There's an excited young man here who keeps telling me this is *not* a public telephone booth — do you mean him, I wonder? . . . He does look something like a fireman, now you mention it. What do you use him for? a signal fire, or something? . . . Oh! You *do?* Why, forevermore! Is he nice to talk to? . . . No, I haven't. He just keeps telling me this is *not* a public . . . Oh, I don't! I don't see how anybody could mind him — do you? . . . Well, of course, a person doesn't look for politeness away up . . . Ha-ha — why, does the altitude make a difference? Maybe that's what ails me, then — That's awfully nice of you, man . . . No, never mind what my name is. Don't let's be ordinary. I'm just a voice from the mountain top, and you're just a voice from the valley. So be it. . . . Without an invitation? I only thanked you . . ."

"Keep on," interjected Jack savagely, "and you'll have his wife trailing you up with a gun!"

"Well — we'll see. . . . But do come sometime when you can — and bring your wife! I'd love to meet some woman. . . . Oh, all right. Good-by."

With a gloved palm pressed hard over the mouthpiece she turned reproachfully upon Jack. "Now you *did* fix things, didn't you? Of course, you knew I couldn't be nice to a man with a wife, so you had to go and spoil everything. And I was just beginning to have a lovely time!"

"Help yourself," Jack offered with heavy sarcasm. "Don't mind me at all."

"Well, he wants to talk to you," she said. She put her lips again to the mouthpiece and added a postscript. "Pardon me, but I held the line a minute while I quarreled with your fireman. You're wrong — I don't find him so nice to talk to. You may talk to him if you want to — I'm sure you're welcome!" Whereupon she surrendered the receiver and walked around the high, map-covered table, and amused herself by playing an imaginary game of billiards with the pointer for a cue and two little spruce cones which she took from her pocket for balls.

When Jack had finished talking and had hung up the receiver, he leaned back against the shelf and watched her, his hands thrust deep into his trousers pockets. He still scowled — but one got the impression that he was holding that frown consciously and stubbornly and not because his mood matched it.

Marion placed a cone at a point on the chart which was marked Greenville, aimed for Spring Garden and landed the cone neatly in the middle of Jack's belt.

"Missed the pocket a mile," he taunted grudgingly, hating to be pleasant and yet helpless against the girl's perfect composure and good humor.

"Give it back, and I'll try it again. There's a place called the Pocket. I'll try that, for luck." Then she added carelessly —"What would have happened, if you hadn't answered that man at all?"

"I'd have been canned, maybe."

"Forevermore." She pretended to chalk her cue with a tiny powder puff which she took from a ridiculous vanity bag that swung from her belt. "Wouldn't you kind of like to be canned — under the circumstances?"

"No, I wouldn't. I need the money." Jack bit his lips to keep from grinning at the powder-puff play.

"Oh, I see." She tried another shot. "Why don't you cut the legs off this table? I would. It's miles too high."

"I don't monkey with government property, myself." He placed a peculiar accent on the last word, thus pointing his meaning very clearly.

"Now, *what* do you know about *that?* Missed it — with a government cone, shot by a government stick on a government table, while a government scowl fairly shrieks: 'Cut out this desecration!'" She chalked her cue gravely, powdered her nose afterward, using a round scrap of a mirror not much bigger than a silver dollar. "Do you stay up here all the time and scowl, all by yourself?"

"All the time and scowl, all by myself." Jack took his hands from his pockets that he might light his pipe; which was a sign that he was nearly ready to treat the girl kindly. "If you object to smoke —" and he waved one hand significantly toward the open door.

"All the time — all by yourself. And you don't want to be canned, either." With the pointer Marion drew aimless little invisible volutes upon the map, connecting the two spruce cones with an imaginary scroll design. "How touching!" she said enigmatically.

"Sure, you're heart-broken over the pathos of it. I can see that. You ought to put in about a week here — that's all I've got to say."

"Think I couldn't?" She looked across at him queerly.

"You wouldn't dare go any farther away than the spring. You'd have to stay right here on this peak every minute of the twenty-four hours. They call up at all kinds of ungodly times, just to see if you're on the job, if they think you're snitching. They'd catch you gone sometime — you couldn't get by with it — and then —"

"The can," finished Miss Marion gravely. "But what I want to know is, what have you done?"

"Done?" Jack's jaw dropped slack away from the pipestem. "What yuh mean, done?"

"Yes. What have you done that they should put you up here and make you stay up here? It sounds —"

"Now, even a tourist knows that this is a Forest Service lookout station, and that I'm here to watch out for fires down below! I'm your guardian angel, young lady. Treat me with respect, if not with kindness."

"I'm a member of the no-treat reform club. Honestly, don't they let you leave here at all?"

"Four days a month." He heaved a heavy sigh and waved his pipe toward the great outdoors. "'S big world, when it's all spread out in sight," he volunteered.

"Can't you — can't you even go down to the lake and fish, when you want to?"

"Nope. Four days a month — and if they didn't happen to have a spare man lying round handy, to send up here to take my place, I couldn't go then even."

Marion regarded him meditatively. "You can have an hour's recess now, if you like," she offered generously after a minute. "I'll stay and answer the phone, and stand them off if they want to talk to you. I'm good at that. You can go and climb down to the lake and fish, and have fun."

"Tell me to go and jump in the lake and I might do it," Jack returned gloomily. He found it rather pleasant to be sympathized with and pitied. "What if a fire broke out while I was gone?"

"Well, what if? I could do what you would do, couldn't I? What do you do when a fire breaks out?"

That gave Jack a fair excuse for leaving his place by the shelf, and coming around to her side of the table, and for taking the pointer from her and standing close beside her while he explained the chart. Needless to say, he made use of the excuse immediately.

"First off," he instructed, "you don't want to be a boob and go reporting train smoke, like I did the first day I was here. Picked up a black smoke down below, here — right down there! I got the number on the chart and phoned it in, and the lookout on Claremont didn't yeep about it. So they called up and asked him to come alive and report. By that time the smoke had moved from where I saw it, and the whole train was in sight from his station, coming round the hill into Marston. He never thought of that being it, he said afterward. They got busy in the office and called me up again, and I located her again — only in a different place. Fellow on Claremont — that's it away over there; see that white speck? That's the station, just like this one. He's an old crab, Hank tells me. He said I must be bugs. Had him squinting around some, I bet! Then they got wise that I was reporting a through freight, and they kid me about it yet. But they fell for it at first all right!"

"What do you know about that!" Marion melodiously exclaimed, and laughed companionably.

She wanted to know all the things that real tourists want to know, and Jack forgot that he hated to answer foolish questions. The piles of empty coal-oil cans, for instance — she should have known that they had been packed up there full, to run the oil stove in the corner. The spring — he had to take his bucket and go down with her and show her where the spring was, but he did not seem to mind that, either. The flag, whipping over the station on its short staff, interested her too, and he helped her guess how long it would be before the stars and stripes snapped themselves to ribbons. The book on astronomy she dipped into, turning it to look at the full-page illustrations of certain constellations that were to Jack like old friends. The books on forestry she glanced at, and the magazines she inspected with less interest.

"Oh, I've got the latest movie magazines. I could bring them up sometime if you like — or send them by the man who brings your stuff up, if you'll tell him to stop at the cabin."

"You bring them yourself," Jack urged, his eagerness so open and unashamed that Marion blushed, and suddenly remembered Kate down the slope there waiting for her. She must go, she said; and she went, almost as suddenly as she came, and never mentioned her half-formed determination to wait up there for the sunset.

Jack went with her as far as he dared, and stood under a wind-tortured balsam fir and watched her out of sight. On the last ledge before the trail dipped down over the hump that would hide her for good, she turned and looked up at him. She stood there poised — so it seemed — between mountain-crest and the sky. The lake lay quiet and shadowed, deep below her, as though

God had dropped a tear and the mountain was holding it reverently cupped, sheltering it from the keen winds of the heights. Beyond, painted with the delicate shadings of distance and yellow sunlight, Indian Valley lay quietly across the lap of the world, its farms and roads and fences sketched in lightly, as with the swift pencil strokes of an artist; its meandering, willow-fringed streams making contrast with the yellowed fields of early harvest time.

She stood there poised like a bird on the rim of the world. Her slimness, her sure grace, her yellow hair shining under the beach hat she wore tilted back from her face, struck him like a blow in the face from that pleasurable past wherein woman beauty had been so abundant. She was of the town; moreover, he felt that she was of the town from which he had fled in guilt and terror. She stood for a long minute, taking in the full sweep of the rugged peak. She was not looking at him especially, until she turned to go on. Then she waved her hand carelessly — slightingly, he felt in his misery — and went down the steep slope.

Until he could no longer see the crown of her hat he looked after her. Then, the sickness of his terrible loneliness upon him again, he turned and slowly climbed back to his glass-walled prison.

CHAPTER NINE

LIKE THE BOY HE WAS

DOWN the balsam and manzanita slope toward the little valley where she lived, Jack stared hungrily during many an empty, dragging hour. Until the darkness had twice drawn down the black curtain that shut him away from the world, he had hoped she would come. She had been so friendly, so understandingly sympathetic — she must know how long the days were up there.

On the third day Hank came riding up the trail that sought the easiest slopes. He brought coal-oil and bacon and coffee and smoking tobacco and the week's accumulation of newspapers, and three magazines; but he did not bring any word from Marion Rose, nor the magazines she had promised. When Hank had unsaddled the horses to rest their backs, and had eaten his lunch and had smoked a cigarette in the shade of a rock, his slow thoughts turned to the gossip of his little world.

He told of the latest encounter with the crabbed fireman on Claremont, grinning appreciatively because the fireman's ill temper had been directed at a tourist who had gone up with Hank. He related a small scandal that was stirring the social pond of Quincy, and at last he swung nearer to the four who had taken mining claims along Toll Gate Creek.

"Too bad you can't go down to Toll-house an' git acquainted with your neighbors," he drawled half maliciously. "There's a girl in the bunch that's sure easy to look at. Other one is an old maid — looks too much like a schoolma'm to suit me. But say — I'm liable to make a trip up here twice a week, from now on! I'm liable to eat my dinner 'fore I git here, too. Some class to that girl, now, believe me! Only trouble is, I'm kinda afraid one of the men has got a string on her. There's two of 'em in the outfit. One is one of them he schoolma'ms that goes around in a boiled shirt and a hard-boiled hat, buzzin' like a mosquito. He's sweet on the old maid. It's the other one I'm leery of. He's the brother of the old maid, and he's the kind that don't say much but does a lot uh thinkin'. Big, too.

"They've took up a bunch of minin' claims around there and are livin' in that cabin. Goin' to winter there, the old maid was tellin' me. I brought out their mail to 'em. Marion Rose is the girl's name. I guess she's got a feller or two down in Los Angeles — I brought out a couple letters today in men's writin' — different hands, at that.

"They's somethin' queer about 'em that I can't see through. They was both settin' out in the sun — on that log right by the trail as you go in to the cabin — and they'd washed their hair and had it all down their backs dryin' it. And the girl was cleanin' the old maid's finger nails for her! I come purty near astin' the old maid if she had to have somebody wash her face for her too. But they didn't seem to think it was anything outa the way at all — they went right to talkin' and visitin' like they was fixed for company. I kinda s'picion Marion bleaches her hair. Seems to me like it's a mite too yeller to be growed that way. Drugstore blonde, I'd call her. You take notice first time you see her. I'll bet you'll say —"

"Aw, can that chatter, you poor fish!" Jack exploded unexpectedly, and smote Hank on his lantern jaw with the flat of his palm. "You hick from hicktown! You brainless ape! You ain't a man — you're a missing link! Give you a four-foot tail, by harry, and you'd go down the mountain swinging from branch to branch like the monkey that you are! What are *you*, you poor piece of cheese, to talk about a woman?"

His hand to his jaw, Hank got up from where he had sprawled on his back. He was not a fighting man, preferring to satisfy his grudges by slurring people behind their backs. But Jack smacked him again and thought of a few other things to which he might liken Hank, and after that Hank fought like a trapped bobcat, with snarls and kicks and gouging claws. He scratched Jack's neck with his grimy fingernails, and he tried to set his unwashed teeth into Jack's left ear while the two of them rolled over and over on the slippery mat of squaw-carpet. And for that he was pummeled unmercifully before Jack tore himself loose and got up.

"Now, you beat it!" Jack finished, panting. "And after this you keep your tongue off the subject of women. Don't dare to mention even a squaw to me, or I'll pitch you clean off the peak!"

Hank mumbled an insult, and Jack went after him again. All the misery, all the pent-up bitterness of the past three months rose within him in a sudden storm that clouded his reason. He fought Hank like a crazy man — not so much because Hank was Hank and had spoken slightingly of that slim girl, but because Hank was something concrete, something which Jack could beat with his fists and that could give back blow for blow. Too long had he waged an unequal conflict with his own thoughts, his aloneness; with regrets and soul hunger and idleness. When he had spent his strength and most of his rage together, he let Hank go and felt tenderly his own bruised knuckles.

He never knew how close he was to death in the next five minutes, while Hank was saddling up to go. For Hank's fingers went several times to his rifle and hovered there, itching to do murder, while Hank's mind revolved the consequences. Murder would be madness — suicide, practically. The boy would be missed when he did not answer the telephone. Some one would be sent up from the Forest Service and the murder would be discovered, unless — unless Hank could hide the body. There was the lake — but the lake was so clear! Besides, there was always the chance at this season of the year that some tourist would be within sight. Some tourist might even hear the shot. It would be risky — too risky. Like Jack's, his rage cooled while he busied himself mechanically with saddling his horse. After all, Hank was not criminally inclined, except as anger drove him. He set the pack-saddle and empty sacks on the pack horse, led his horse a few feet farther away and mounted, scowling.

In the saddle he turned and looked for the first time full at Jack. "You think you're darn smart!" he snarled wryly because of a cut lip that had swollen all on one side. "You may think you're smart, but they's another day comin'. You wait — that's all I got to say!"

It did not make him feel any better when Jack laughed suddenly and loud. "*R-r-r-evenge!* By my heart's blood, I shall have r-r-evenge!" he intoned mockingly. "Gwan outa my sight, Hank. You ain't making any hit with me at all. *Scat!*"

"All right fer you!" Hank grumbled, in the futile repartee of the stupid. "You think you're smart, but I don't. You wait!" Then he rode away down the trail, glowering at the world through puffy lids and repeating to himself many crushing things he wished he had thought to say to Jack.

Jack himself had recourse to a small bottle of iodine left there by a predecessor, painting his scratches liberally, and grinning at himself in the little mirror because Hank had not once landed a bruising blow on his face. After that he washed the dishes and went to the spring for a bucket of fresh water, whistling all the way. It was amazing how that fight had cleared his mental atmosphere.

After that, he perched up on the little rock pinnacle just behind the station, and stared down the mountain toward Toll-Gate Flat, where she lived. He saw Hank ride into the balsam thicket; and he, too, thought of several things he regretted not having said to Hank. What rotten luck it was that he should be held up here on that pinnacle while Hank Brown could ride at his leisure down into that tiny valley! The government ought to gather up all the Hank Browns in the country and put them up on such places as these, and let decent fellows do the riding around.

Down there, beyond the trail, on a slope where the manzanita was not quite so matted together, he saw something move slowly. Then it stopped, and he got a gleam of light, the reflection, evidently of some bright object. He lifted the telescope and focussed it, and his heart came leaping up into his throat just as the figure came leaping into close view through the powerful lense.

It was Marion Rose, up by the hydrometer that looked something like a lone beehive perched on a wild slope by itself. She was sitting on a rock with her feet crossed, and she was inspecting her chin in the tiny mirror of her vanity bag. Some blemish — or more likely an insect bite, from the way her fingertip pressed carefully a certain point of her chin — seemed to hold all her attention. It was the sun flashing on the bit of mirror that had made the gleam.

Jack watched her hungrily; her slim shape, leaning negligently sidewise; her hat pushed back a little; her hair, the color of ripe corn, fluffed where the wind had blown it; the clear, delicate, creamy tint of her skin, her mouth curved in soft, red lines that held one's eyes fascinated when they moved in speech. He watched her, never thinking of the rudeness of it.

And then he saw her lift her face and look up to the peak, directly at him, it seemed to him. His face turned hot, and he lowered the glass guiltily. But of course she could not see him — or if she could, he looked no more than a speck on the rock. He lifted the telescope again, and her face jumped into close view. She was still looking up his way, the little mirror turning idly in her hand. Her face was thoughtful; almost wistful, he dared to think. Perhaps she was lonesome, too. She had told him that she had spells of being terribly lonesome.

Jack had an inspiration. He climbed hurriedly down off the rock, got his own looking glass and climbed back again. He turned the glass so that the sun shown on it aslant and threw a glare toward her. Then he lifted the telescope quickly to see if she noticed the sparkle. After a moment he decided that she had seen it but did not quite know what had caused it. At any rate, she was still looking that way, which was something.

Like the boy he was, he lay down on his stomach, balanced the telescope across a splintered notch in the rock so that he could steady it with one hand, and with the other he tilted the mirror; inadvertently tilted the telescope also, and came near smashing the mirror before he got the two balanced again. Well, she was still looking, at any rate. And now she was frowning a little, as though she was puzzled.

He signalled again, and this time he managed to keep her in the field of the telescope. He saw her smile suddenly and glance down at her vanity mirror. Still smiling, she lifted it and turned it to the sun, looking from it to the peak.

"She's on! I'll be John Browned if she ain't on to it already!" Jack chortled to the birds, and sent her a signal. She answered that with a flash. He managed two flashes without losing her in the telescope, and she immediately sent two flashes in reply. Three he gave, and she answered with three. He could see her laughing like a child with a new game. He could see the impish light in her eyes when she glanced up, like a woman engrossed in her favorite pastime of bedeviling some man. He laughed back at her, as though she was as near to him as she looked to be. He quite forgot that she was not, and spoke to her aloud.

"Some little heliographing — what? Come on up, and we'll make up a code, so we can talk! Aw, come on — it ain't so far! Husky girl like you can climb it in no time at all. Aw, come on!"

A couple of tourists, panting up to the peak with unsightly amber goggles and a kodak and a dog, found him addressing empty air and looked at him queerly.

Jack could have murdered them both when he turned his head and saw them gaping open-mouthed at his performance. But he did not. He climbed shamefacedly down and answered the usual questions with his usual patient courtesy, and hoped fervently that they would either die at once of heart failure or go back to the lake and leave him alone. Instead, they took pictures of the station and the rocks and of him — though Jack was keen-witted enough to keep in the shade and turn his face away from the camera.

They were such bores of tourists! The woman was sunburned and frowsy, and her khaki outing suit was tight where it should be loose, and hung in unsightly wrinkles where it should fit snugly. Her high-laced mountain boots were heavy and shapeless, and she climbed here and there, and stood dumpily and stared down at Jack's beloved woods through her amber glasses until she nearly drove him frantic. She kept saying: "Oh, papa, don't you wish you could get a snap of that?" and "Oh, papa, come and see if you can't snap this!"

Papa was not much better. Papa's khaki suit had come off a pile on the counter of some department store — the wrong pile. Papa kept taking off his hat and wiping his bald spot, and hitching his camera case into a different position, so that it made a new set of wrinkles in the middle of his back. The coat belt strained against its buttons over papa's prosperous paunch, and he wheezed when he talked.

And down there on the manzanita slope, little flashes of light kept calling, calling, and Jack dared not answer. One, two — one, two, three — could anything in the world be more maddening?

Then all at once a puff of smoke came ballooning up through the trees, down beyond the girl and well to the right of the balsam thicket. Jack whirled and dove into the station, his angry eyes flashing at the tourists.

"There's a forest fire started, down the mountain," he told them harshly. "You better beat it for Keddie while you can get there!" He slammed the door in their startled faces and laid the pointer on its pivot and swung it toward the smoke.

The smoke was curling up already in an ugly yellowish brown cloud, spreading in long leaps before the wind. Jack's hand shook when he reached for the telephone to report the fire. The chart and his own first-hand knowledge of the mountainside told him that the fire was sweeping down north of Toll-Gate Creek toward the heavily timbered ridge beyond.

Heedless of the presence or absence of the tourists, he snatched the telescope and climbed the rock where he could view the slope where the girl had been. The smoke was rolling now over the manzanita slope, and he could not pierce its murkiness. He knew that the slope was not yet afire, but the wind was bearing the flames that way, and the manzanita would burn with a zipping rush once it started. He knew. He had stood up there and watched the flames sweep over patches of the shrub.

He rushed back into the station, seized the telephone and called again the main office.

"For the Lord sake, hustle up here and do something!" he shouted aggressively. "The whole blamed mountain's afire!" That, of course, was exaggeration, but Jack was scared.

Out again on the rock, he swept the slope beneath him with his telescope. He could not see anything of the girl, and the swirling smoke filled him with a horror too great for any clear thought. He climbed down and began running down the pack trail like one gone mad, never stopping to wonder what he could do to save her; never thinking that he would simply be sharing her fate, if what he feared was true — if the flames swept over that slope.

He stumbled over a root and fell headlong, picked himself up and went on again, taking great leaps, like a scared deer. She was down there. And when the fire struck that manzanita it would just go *swoosh* in every direction at once. . . . And so he, brave, impulsive young fool that he was, rushed down into it as though he were indeed a god and could hold back the flames until she was safe away from the place.

CHAPTER TEN

WHEN FORESTS ARE ABLAZE

IT seemed to Jack that he had been running for an hour, though it could not have been more than a few minutes at most. Where the trail swung out and around a steep, rocky place, he left it and plunged heedlessly straight down the hill. The hot breath of the fire swept up in gusts, bearing charred flakes that had been leaves. The smoke billowed up to him, then drove back in the tricky air-currents that played impishly around the fire. When he could look down to the knoll where the hydrometer stood, he saw that it was not yet afire, but that the flames were working that way faster even than he had feared.

Between gasps he shouted her name as Hank Brown had repeated it to him. He stopped on a ledge and stared wildly, in a sudden panic, lest he should somehow miss her. He called again, even while reason told him that his voice could not carry any distance, with all that crackle and roar. He forced himself to stand there for a minute to get his breath and to see just how far the fire had already swept, and how fast it was spreading.

Even while he stood there, a flaming pine branch came whirling up and fell avidly upon a buck bush beside him. The bush crackled and shriveled, a thin spiral of smoke mounting upward into the cloud that rolled overhead. Jack stood dazed, watching the yellow tongues go licking up the smaller branches. While he stood looking, the ravaging flames had devoured leaves and twigs and a dead branch or two, and left the bush a charred, smoking, dead thing that waved its blackened stubs of branches impotently in the wind. Alone it had stood, alone it had died the death of fire.

"Marion Rose!" he shouted abruptly, and began running again. "Marion Rose!" But the hot wind whipped the words from his lips, and the deep, sullen roar of the fire drowned his voice. Still calling, he reached the road that led to Crystal Lake. The wind was hotter, the roar was deeper and louder and seemed to fill all the world. Hot, black ash flakes settled thick around him.

Then, all at once, he saw her standing in the middle of the road, a little farther up the hill. She was staring fascinated at the fire, her eyes wide like a child's, her face with the rapt look he had seen when she stood looking down from the peak into the heart of the forest. And then, when he saw her, Jack could run no more. His knees bent under him, as though the bone had turned suddenly to soft gristle, and he tottered weakly when he tried to hurry to her.

"Isn't it wonderful?" she called out when she saw him. Her words came faintly to him in all that rush and crackle of flame and wind together. "I never saw anything like it before — did you? It sprung up all at once, and the first I knew it was sweeping along."

"Don't stand here!" Jack panted hoarsely. "Good Lord, girl! You —"

"Why, you've been running!" she cried, in a surprised tone. "Were you down there in it? I thought you had to stay up on top." She had to raise her voice to make him hear her.

Her absolute ignorance of the danger exasperated him. He took her by the arm and swung her up the trail. "We've got to beat it!" he yelled in her ear. "Can't you see it's coming this way?"

"It can't come fast enough to catch us," she answered impatiently. "It's away back there down the hill yet. Wait! I want to watch it for a minute."

A bushy cedar tree ten feet away to their left suddenly burst into flame and burned viciously, each branch a sheet of fire.

"Well, what do you know about *that?*" cried Marion Rose. "It jumped from away down there!"

"Come on!" Pulling her by the arm, Jack began running again up the hill, leaving the road where it swung to the east and taking a short cut through the open space in the brush. "Run!" he urged, still pulling at her arm. "We've — got to — swing around it —"

She ran with him, a little of their peril forcing itself upon her consciousness and making her glance often over her shoulder. And Jack kept pulling at her arm, helping her to keep her feet when she stumbled, which she did often, because she would not look where she was going.

"Don't look — run!" he urged, when another brand fell in a fir near them and set the whole tree ablaze. The air around them was hot, like the breath of a furnace.

She did not answer him, but she let him lead her whither he would. And they came breathless to the rocky outcropping through which the pack trail wormed its way farther down the hill. There he let her stop, for he knew that they had passed around the upper edge of the fire, and were safe unless the wind changed. He helped her upon a high, flat-topped boulder that overlooked the balsam thicket and manzanita slope, and together they faced the debauchery of the flames.

Even in the few minutes since Jack had stopped on that rocky knoll the fire had swept far. It had crossed the Crystal Lake road and was now eating its way steadily up the timbered hillside beyond. The manzanita slope where the girl had sat and signalled with her mirror was all charred and stripped bare of live growth, and the flames were licking up the edges beyond.

Jack touched her arm and pointed to the place. "You said it couldn't travel very fast," he reminded her. "Look down there where you sat fooling with the little mirror."

Marion looked and turned white. "Oh!" she cried. "It wasn't anywhere near when I started up the road. Oh, do you suppose it has burned down as far as the cabin? Because there's Kate — can't we go and see?"

"We can't, and when I left the lookout the fire was away up this side of Toll-Gate, and not spreading down that way. Wind's strong. Come on — I expect I better beat it back up there. They might phone."

"But I must hunt Kate up! Why, she was all alone there, taking a nap in the hammock! If it should —"

"It won't," Jack reiterated positively. "I ought to know, oughtn't I? It's my business to watch fires and see how they're acting, isn't it?" He saw her still determined, and tried another argument. "Listen here. It isn't far up to the station. We'll go up there, and I'll phone down to the office to have the firemen stop and see if she's all right. They'll have to come right by there, to get at the fire. And you can't cross that burning strip now — not on a bet, you couldn't. And if you could," he added determinedly, " I wouldn't let you try it. Come on — we'll go up and do that little thing, telephone to the office and have them look after Kate."

Marion, to his great relief, yielded to the point of facing up hill with him and taking a step or two. " But you don't know Kate," she demurred, turning her face again toward the welter of burning timber. " She'll be worried to death about me, and it would be just like her to start right out to hunt me up. I've simply got to get back and let her know I'm all right."

Jack threw back his head and laughed aloud — think how long it had been since he really had laughed! " What's the matter with phoning that you're all right? I guess the wire will stand that extra sentence, maybe — and you can phone in yourself, if you want to convince them ab-so-lutely. What?"

" Well, who'd ever have thought that I might phone a message to Kate! Down there in that hole of a place where we live, one can scarcely believe that there are telephones in the world. Let's hurry, then. Kate will be perfectly wild till she hears that I am safe. And then —" she quirked her lips in a little smile, " she'll be wilder still because I'm not there where she supposed I'd be when she waked up."

Jack replied with something slangy and youthful and altogether like the old Jack Corey, and led her up the steep trail to the peak. They took their time, now that they were beyond the fire zone. They turned often to watch the flames while they got their breath; and every time Marion stopped, she observed tritely that it was a shame such beautiful timber must burn, and invariably added, "But isn't it beautiful?" And to both observations Jack would agree without any scorn of the triteness. Whereas he would have been furious had a mere tourist exclaimed about the beauty of a forest fire, which to him had always seemed a terrible thing.

They found the telephone ringing like mad, and Jack turned red around the ears and stuttered a good deal before he was through answering the questions of the supervisor, and explaining why he had not answered the phone in the last hour.

"Here, let me talk," commanded Marion suddenly, and took the receiver out of Jack's hand. "I'll tell you where he was," she called crisply to the accusing voice at the other end. "I was down the hill, right in the track of the fire, and I couldn't get back to the cabin at all, and — ah — this gentleman saw me through the telescope and ran down there and got me out of it. And right where I had been sitting on a rock, the fire has burned just everything! And I wish you would get word somehow to Miss Kate Humphrey, at Toll-Gate cabin, that Marion Rose is all right and will be home just as soon as she can get down there without burning her shoes. And — oh, will you please tell her that I took the bread out of the oven before I left, and that it's under the box the cream came in? I put it there to keep the bluejays away from it till she woke up, and she may not know where to look. . . . Yes, thank you, I think that will be all. . . . But listen! This man up here saved my life, though of course it is a pity he was not here to answer the phone, every minute of the day. What I want to say is that it was my fault, and I hope you'll please excuse me for having a life that needed to be saved just when you called! I wouldn't for the world . . . Oh, don't mention it! I just didn't want you to blame him, is all. Good-by."

She turned to Jack with a little frown. "People seem to think, just because you work for a living, that your whole mission in life is to take orders on the jump. It was that way at the Martha Washington, and every other place I ever worked. That man down there seems to think that your life begins and ends right here in this little glass box. What made you apologize for keeping a telephone call waiting while you went out and saved a perfectly good life? Men are the queerest things!"

She went out and climbed upon the rock where Jack had lain watching her, and set herself down as comfortably as possible, and stared at the fire while Jack located on the chart the present extent of the blazing area, and sent in his report. When he had finished he did not go out to her immediately. He stood staring down the hill with his eyebrows pinched together. Now and then he lifted his hand unconsciously and pushed his heavy thatch of hair straight back from his forehead, where it began at once to lie wavy as of old. He was feeling again the personal sense of tragedy and loss in that fire; cursing again his helplessness to check it or turn it aside from that beautiful stretch of timber over toward Genessee.

Now the shadows had crept down the slope again to where the fire glow beat them back while it crisped the balsam thicket. Behind him the sun, sinking low over the crest of a far-off ridge, sent flaming banners across the smoke cloud. The sky above was all curdled with gold and crimson, while the smoke cloud below was a turgid black shot through with sparks and tongues of flame.

Where were the fire-fighters, that they did not check the mad race of flames before they crossed that canyon?

It seemed to Jack that never had a fire burned with so headlong a rush. Then his eyes went to the blackened manzanita slope where Marion had been idling, and he shivered at what might have happened down there. To comfort himself with the sight of her safe and serene, he turned and went out, meaning to go up where she was.

She was still sitting on the rock, gazing down the mountain, her face sober. Her hat was off, and the wind was blowing the short strands of her hair around her face. She was leaning back a little, braced by a hand upon the rock. She looked a goddess of the mountain tops, Jack thought. He stood there staring up at her, just as he had stared down at her when she had stood looking into the lake. Did she feel as he felt about the woods and mountains? he wondered. She seemed rather fond of staring and staring and saying nothing — and yet, he remembered, when she talked she gave no hint at all of any deep sense of the beauty of her surroundings. When she talked she was just like other town girls he had known, a bit slangy, more than a bit self-possessed, and frivolous to the point of being flippant. That type he knew and could meet fairly on a level. But when she was looking and saying nothing, she seemed altogether different. Which, he wondered, was the real Marion Rose?

While he stood gazing, she turned and looked down at him; a little blankly at first, as though she had just waked from sleep or from abstraction too deep for instant recovery. Then she smiled and changed her position, putting up both hands to pat and pull her hair into neatness; and with the movement she ceased to be a brooding goddess of the mountain tops, and became again the girl who had perversely taken the telephone away from him, the girl who had played mock billiards upon his beloved chart, the girl who said — she said it now, while he was thinking of her melodious way of saying it.

"Well, what do you know about that?" she inquired, making a gesture with one arm toward the fire while with the other she fumbled in her absurd little vanity bag. "It just burns as if it had a grudge against the country, doesn't it? But isn't it perfectly gorgeous, with all that sunset and everything! It looks like a Bliffen ten-reel picture. He ought to see it — he could get some great pointers for his next big picture. Wouldn't that be just dandy on the screen?" She had found her powder puff and her tiny mirror, and she was dabbing at her nose and her cheeks, which no more needed powder than did the little birds that chirped around her. Between dabs, she was looking down the mountain, with an occasional wave of her puff toward some particularly "striking effect" of fire and sunset and rolling smoke and tall pines seen dimly in the background.

Jack wanted to climb up there and shake her out of her frivolity. Which was strange when you consider that all his life, until three months ago, he had lived in the midst of just such unthinking flippancy, had been a part of it and had considered — as much as he ever considered anything — that it was the only life worth living.

He went around the little rock pinnacle and stood looking somberly down at the devastation that was being wrought, with no greater beginning, probably, than a dropped match or cigarette stub. He was thinking hazily that so his old life had been swept away in the devastating effect of a passing whim, a foolish bit of play. The girl irritated him with her chatter — yet three months ago he himself would have considered it brilliant conversation, and would have exerted himself to keep pace with her.

"Listen!" she cried suddenly, and Jack turned his head quickly before he remembered that the word had come to mean nothing more than a superfluous ejaculation hung, like a bangle on a bracelet, to the sentences of modern youth. "Listen, it's going to be dark before that fire burns itself out of the way. How am I going to get home? Which way would be best to go around it, do you think?"

"No way at all," Jack replied shortly. "You can't go home."

"Why, forevermore! I'll have to go somewhere else, then — to some farm house where I can phone. Kate would be simply wild if —"

"Forget the farm house stuff. There aren't any such trimmings to these mountains. The next farm house is down around Keddie, somewhere. Through the woods, and mountain all the way." He said it rather crossly, for his nerves were what he called edgy, and the girl still irritated him.

"Well, what do you know about that?"

He had known she would say that. Cross between a peacock and a parrot, she must be, he thought vindictively. It was maddening that she would not — could not, perhaps? — live up to that goddess-on-the-mountain-top look she had sometimes.

"I don't know anything about it except that it's hard luck for us both."

"Well, what —?" She paused in the act of putting away her first-aid-to-the-complexion implements, and looked at him with her wide, purple eyes. "Why, you cross, mean, little stingy boy, you! You can have your old peak then. I'll go down and jump in the lake."

She began to climb down from the little pinnacle quite as if she meant to do exactly as she said.

"Aw, come out of it!" Jack tried not to turn and look at her anxiously, but he was a human being.

"I'm not in it — yet," Marion retorted with dark meaning, and jumped to the ground.

"Hey! you wanta break a leg?" He swung toward her.

"Just to spite you, I wouldn't mind. Only you'd throw me down there amongst all those rocks and trees and make it my neck. Oh, would you look at that!"

"That" happened to be Mount Lassen, belching forth a stupendous column of ashes and smoke. Up, up, up it went, as though it meant to go on and on into infinity. Jack had seen it too often to be affected as he had been that first night. He looked at Marion instead. She was standing with her hands clinched by her side, and her breath sucking in. As the black column mounted higher and higher, she lifted herself to her toes, posing there absolutely unconscious of herself. Jack saw her face grow pale; saw her eyes darken and glow with inner excitement. She was once more the goddess on the mountain top, gazing down at one of the wonders she had wrought. It was as though she pulled that black column up and up and up with the tensity of her desire.

The column mushroomed suddenly, rolling out in great, puffy billows before it dipped and went streaming away on the wind. The mountain beneath it spewed sluggish masses of vapor and ashes up into the black moil above, until the whole mountain was obscured and only an angry, rolling cloud churning lumpishly there, told what was hidden beneath.

Marion relaxed, took a long, deep breath and settled again to her trim heels. She was not filled with terror as Jack had been; though that may have been because she was not cast up here like a piece of driftwood out of her world, nor was she alone. But Jack paid her the tribute of bowing mentally before her splendid courage. She gazed a while longer, awed ecstasy in her face. Then slowly she swung and stared at that other churning cloud behind her — the crimsoned-tinted cloud of destruction. She flung out both arms impulsively.

"Oh, you world!" she cried adoringly, unafraid yet worshipping. "I'd like to be the wind, so I could touch you and kiss you and beat you, and make you love me the way I love you! I'd rather be a tree and grow up here and swing my branches in the wind and then burn, than be a little petty, piffling human being — I would! I'm not afraid of you. You couldn't make me afraid of you. You can storm and rage around all you like. I only love you for it — you beautiful thing!"

It made Jack feel as though he had blundered upon a person kneeling in prayer; she was, after all, the goddess she looked, he thought whimsically. At least she had all the makings of a goddess of the mountain top. He felt suddenly inferior and gross, and he turned to leave her alone with her beautiful, terrible world. But manlike he did a frightfully human and earthly thing; he knocked his foot against an empty coal-oil can, and stood betrayed in his purpose of flight.

She turned her head and looked at him like one just waking from a too-vivid dream. She frowned, and then she smiled with a little ironical twist to her soft curving lips.

"You heard what I said about piffling human beings?" she asked him sweetly. "That is your catalogue number. Why for goodness' sake! With your hair done in that marcelle pompadour, and that grin, you look exactly like Jack Corey, that Los Angeles boy that all the girls were simply crazy about, till he turned out to be such a perfectly terrible villain!"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

SYMPATHY AND ADVICE

EVERY bit of color was swept from Jack's face, save the black of his lashes and eyebrows and the brown of his eyes that looked at her in startled self-betrayal. He saw the consternation flash into her face when she first understood how truly her random shot had hit the mark, and he dropped upon the bench by the doorway and buried his face in his shaking hands. But youth does not suffer without making some struggle against the pain. Suddenly he lifted his head and looked at her with passionate resentment.

"Well, why don't you run and tell?" he cried harshly. "There's the telephone in there. Why don't you call up the office and have them send the sheriff hot-footing it up here? If Jack Corey's such a villain, why don't you do something about it? For the Lord's sake don't stand there looking at me as if I'm going to swallow you whole! Get somebody on the phone, and then beat it before I cut loose and be the perfectly awful villain you think I am!"

Marion took a startled step away from him, turned and came hesitatingly toward him. And as she advanced she smiled a little ostentatiously whimsical smile and touched the butt of her six-shooter.

"I'm heeled, so I should be agitated," she said flippantly. "I always was crazy to get the inside dope on that affair. Tell me. Were you boys honest-to-goodness bandits, or what?"

"What, mostly." Jack gave her a sullen, upward glance from under his eyebrows. "Go ahead and play at cat-and-mouse, if you want to. Nobody'll stop you, I guess. Have all the fun you want — you're getting it cheap enough; cheaper by a darned sight than you'll get the inside dope you're crazy for."

"*What* do you *know* about it! — me running on to Jack Corey, away up here on the top of the world!" But it was hard to be flippant while she looked down into that stricken young face of his, and saw the white line around his lips that ought to be smiling at life; saw, too, the trembling of his bruised hands, that he tried so hard to hold steady. She came still closer; so close that she could have touched his arm.

"It was the papers called you such awful things. I didn't," she said, wistfully defensive. "I couldn't — not after seeing you on the beach that day, playing around like a great big kid, and not making eyes at the girls when they made eyes at you. You — you didn't act like a villain, when I saw you. You acted like a big boy that likes to have fun — oh, just oodles of fun, but hasn't got a mean hair in his head. I know; I watched you and the fellows you were with. I was up on the pier looking down at you whooping around in the surf. And next day, when the girls at the Martha Washington read about it in the papers, I just couldn't believe it was true, what they said about you boys being organized into bandits and all that, and leading a double life and everything.

" But it did look bad when you beat it — about two jumps ahead of the police, at that. You see Fred was along with the man that was shot, and being in the garage and around automobiles all the time, he thought to read the number of your car, and remembered it; near enough anyway, so that he knew for sure it was the Singleton Corey car by the make and general appearance of it, and identified it positively when he saw it in your garage. And that did make it look bad! "

" What did mother do when they — ? " Jack did not look up while he stammered the question that had been three months feeding his imagination with horrors.

" Why, she didn't do anything. She went right away, that very morning, to a sanitarium and would not see anybody but her own private nurse and her own private doctor. They gave out bulletins about how she slept and what she had for breakfast, and all that. But, believe me, brother, they didn't get any dope from her! She just simply would not be interviewed!"

Jack let out a long breath and sat up. At the corners of his mouth there lurked the temptation to smile. "That's mother — true to form," he muttered admiringly.

"Of course, they scouted around and got most of the boys that were with you, but they couldn't get right down to brass tacks and prove anything except that they were with you at the beach. They're still holding them on bail or something, I believe. You know how those things kind of drop out of the news. There was a big police scandal came along and crowded all you little bandits off the front page. But I know the trial hasn't taken place yet, because Fred would have to be a witness, so he'd know, of course. And, besides, the man hasn't died or got well or anything, yet, and they're waiting to see what he's going to do."

"Who's Fred?" Jack stood up and leaned toward her, feeling all at once that he must know, and know at once, who Fred might be.

"Why, he's Kate's brother. He's down here at Toll-Gate cabin, working out the assessments —"

Jack sat down again and caressed his bruised knuckles absently. "Well, then, I guess this is the finish," he said dully, after a minute.

"Why? He'll never climb up here — and if he did he wouldn't know you. He couldn't recognize your face by the number of your car, you know!" Then she added, with beautiful directness, "It wouldn't be so bad, if you hadn't been the ringleader and put the other boys up to robbing cars. But I suppose —"

Jack got up again, but this time he towered belligerently above her. "Who says I was the ringleader? If it was Fred I'll go down there and push his face into the back of his neck for him! Who —"

"Oh, just those nice friends of yours. They wouldn't own up to anything except being with you, but told everybody that it was you that did it. But honestly I didn't believe that. Hardly any of us girls at the Martha did. But Fred —"

Just then the telephone rang again, and Jack had to go in and report the present extent of the fire, and tell just where and just how fast it was spreading, and what was the direction of the wind. The interruption steadied him, gave him time to think.

Since the girl knew him, and knew the circumstances of his flight, and since the boys had turned on him, Jack argued with himself that he might just as well tell her what little there was to tell. There was nothing to be gained by trying to keep the thing a secret from her. Besides, he craved sympathy, though he did not admit it. He craved the privilege of talking about that night to some one who would understand, and who could be trusted. Marion Rose, he felt, was the only person in the world he could tell. He could talk to her — Lord, what a relief that would be! He could tell her all about it, and she would understand. Her sympathy at that moment seemed the most precious thing in the world.

So he went outside and sat down again on the bench, and told her the exact truth about that night; how it had started in drunken foolery, and all the rest of it. He even explained the exact route he had taken home so as to come into town apparently from Pasadena.

"Well, *what* do you know about *that!*" Marion murmured several times during the recital. And Jack found the phrase soothing whenever she uttered it, and plunged straightway into further revelations of his ebullient past.

"I suppose," he ventured, when he could think of nothing more to tell and so came back to the starting point, "I ought to beat it outa here while the beating's good. I can't go back — on account of mother. I could hotfoot it up to Canada, maybe. . . ."

"Don't you do it!" Marion wound the string of her vanity bag so tightly round and round her index finger that her pink, polished nail turned purple. She next unwound the string and rubbed the nail solicitously. "Just because we're down there at Toll-Gate doesn't mean you aren't safe up here. Why, you're safer, really. Because if any one got track of you, we'd hear of it right away — Kate and I walk to town once in a while, and there's hardly a day passes that we don't see somebody to talk to. Everybody talks when they meet you, in this country, whether they know you or not. And I could come up right away and tell you. Having a bandit treed up here on top would make such a hit that they'd all be talking about it. It certainly would be keen to listen to them and know more about it than any of them."

"Oh, would it! I'm glad it strikes you that way — it don't me." What a fool a fellow was when he went spilling his troubles into a girl's ears! He got up and walked glumly down to the niche in the rocks where he hid from tourists, and stood there with his hands in his pockets, glowering down at the fierce, ember-threaded waves of flame that surged through the forest. Dusk only made the fire more terrible to him. Had this new trouble not launched itself at him, he would be filled with a sick horror of the destruction, but as it was he only stared at it dully, not caring much about it one way or the other.

Well, he asked himself, what kind of a fool would he make of himself next? Unloading his secret and his heartache to a girl that only thought it would be "keen" to have a bandit treed up here at the lookout station! Why couldn't he have kept his troubles to himself? He'd be hollering it into the phone, next thing he knew. They'd care, down there in the office, as much as she did, anyway. And the secret would probably be safer with them than it would be with her.

He had a mental picture of her hurrying to tell Fred: "What do you know about it? Jack Corey, the bandit, is treed up at the lookout station! He told me all the inside dope —" The thought of her animated chatter to Fred on the subject of his one real tragedy, made him clench his hands.

The very presence of her brought it back too vividly, though that had not struck him at first, when his hunger for human sympathy had been his keenest emotion. What a fool he had been, to think that she would care! What a fool he had been to think that these mountains would shelter him; to think that he could forget, and be forgotten. And Hen had told them that Jack Corey did it! That was about what Hen would do — sneak out of it. And the man wasn't dead yet; not recovered either, for that matter. There was still the chance that he might die.

There was his mother hiding herself away from her world in a sanitarium. It was like her to do that — but it was hard to know he had broken up all the pleasant, well-ordered little grooves of her life; hard to know how her pride must suffer because he was her son. She would feel now, more than ever, that Jack was just like his father. Being like his father meant reproach because he was not like her, and that was always galling to Jack. And how she must hate the thought of him now.

He wished savagely that Marion Rose could go home. He wanted to be alone with his loneliness. It seemed to him now that being alone meant merely peace and contentment. It was people, he told himself finally, who had brought all this trouble and bitterness into his life.

He wished she would go and leave him alone, but that was manifestly impossible. Angry and hurt though he was, he could not contemplate the thought of letting her go down there into that blackened waste with the thick sprinkling of bonfires where stumps were all ablaze, fallen tangles of brush were smoldering, and dead trees flared like giant torches or sent down great blazing branches. She might get through without disaster, but it would be by a miracle of good luck. Even a man would hesitate to attempt the feat of working his way across the burning strip.

There was no other place where she could go. She could not go alone, in the dark, down the mountain to any of the lower ranches. She would get lost. A man would not try that either, unless forced to it. A man would rather spend the night under a tree than fight through miles of underbrush in the night. And she could not take the old Taylorville road down to Indian Valley, either. It was too far and too dark, and a slight change of the wind would send the fire sweeping in that direction. She might get trapped. And none of these impossibilities took into account the prowling wild animals that are at the best untrustworthy in the dark.

She would have to stay. And he would have to stay, and there did not seem to Jack to be any use in making a disagreeable matter still more disagreeable by sulking. He discovered that he was hungry. He supposed, now he came to think of it, that Marion Rose would be hungry, too. The protective instinct stirred once more within him and pushed back his anger. So he turned and went back to the little station.

Marion had lighted the little lamp, and she was cooking supper over the oil stove. She had found where he stored his supplies in a tightly built box under a small ledge, and she had helped herself. She had two plates and two cups set out upon his makeshift table, and while he stopped in the door she turned from the stove and began cutting slices of bread off one of the loaves which Hank had brought that day. With her head bent toward the lamp, her hair shown like pale gold. Her face looked very serious — a bit sad, too, Jack thought; though he could not see where she had any reason to be sad; she was not hiding away from the law, or anything like that.

When she became conscious of his presence she glanced up at him with swift inquiry. "How's the fire?" she wanted to know, quite as though that was the only subject that interested them both.

"She's all there," he returned briefly, coming in.

"Everything's ready," she announced cheerfully. "You must be half starved. Do you see what time it is? nearly eight o'clock already. And I never dreamed it, until a bird or something flew right past my face and brought me to myself. I was watching Mount Lassen. Isn't it *keen*, to have a volcano spouting off right in your front view? And a fire on the other side, so if you get tired looking at one, you can turn your head and look at the other one. And for a change, you can watch the lake, or just gaze at the scenery;

and say! — does the star spangled banner still wave?"

"She still waves," Jack assented somberly, picking up the wash basin. Why couldn't he enter the girl's foolery? He used to be full of it himself, and he used to consider that the natural form of companionship. He must be getting queer like all other hermits he had ever heard of. It occurred to him that possibly Marion Rose was not really feather-brained, but that the trouble was in himself, because he was getting a chronic grouch.

He was thinking while he ate. He had plenty of encouragement for thinking, because Marion herself seemed to be absorbed in her own thoughts. When she was filling his coffee cup the second time, she spoke quite abruptly.

"It would be terribly foolish for you to leave here, Jack Corey — or whatever you would rather be called. I don't believe any one has the faintest notion that you came up here into this country. If they had, they would have come after you before this. But they're still on the watch for you in other places, and I suppose every police station in the country has your description tacked on the wall or some place.

"I believe you'd better stay right where you are, and wait till something turns up to clear you. Maybe that man will get well, and then it won't be so serious;

though, of course, being right through his lungs, the doctors claim it's pretty bad. I'll know if he dies or not, because he's a friend of Fred's, and Fred would hear right away. And we can make up a set of signals, and flash them with glasses, like we were doing just for fun this afternoon. Then I won't have to climb clear up here if something happens that you ought to know about — don't you see? I can walk out in sight of here and signal with my vanity mirror. It will be fun.

" And when you're through here, if I were you I'd find some nice place here in the hills to camp. It isn't half as bad to stay right in the mountains, as it would be to stay in town and imagine that every strange man you see has come after you. Sometimes I wish I could get right out where there's not a soul, and just stay there. Being in the woods with people around is not like being in the woods with just the woods. I've found that out. People kind of keep your mind tied down to little things that part of you hates, don't you know? Like when I'm with Kate, I think about facial massage and manicuring, and shows that I'd like to see and can't, and places where I'd like to go and eat and watch the people and dance and listen to the music, and can't; and going to the beaches when I can't, and taking automobile trips when I can't, and boys — and all that sort of thing. But when I'm all by myself in the woods, I never think of those things."

"I saw you down there by the hydrometer, all by yourself. And you were using your powder puff to beat the band." A twinkle lived for a second or two in the somber brown of Jack's eyes.

"You did? Well, that was second nature. I wasn't thinking about it, anyway."

"What were you thinking about when you kept staring up here? Not the beauties of nature, I bet." A perverse spirit made Jack try to push her back into the frivolous talk he had so lately and so bitterly deplored.

"Well, I was wondering if you had gumption enough to appreciate being up where you could watch the mountains all the while, and see them by day and by night and get really acquainted with them, so that they would tell you things they remember about the world a thousand years ago. I wondered if you had it in you to appreciate them, and know every little whim of a shadow and every little laugh of the sun — or whether you just stayed up here because they pay you money for staying. I've been so jealous of you, up here in your little glass house! I've lain awake the last three nights, peeking through the tree-tops at the little speck of sky I could see with stars in it, and thinking how you had them spread out all around you — and you asleep, maybe, and never looking!

"I'm awful sorry you're in trouble, and about your mother and all. But I think you're the luckiest boy I know, because you just happened to get to this place. Sometimes when I look at you I just want to take you by the shoulder and *shake* you! — because you don't half know how lucky you are. Why, all that makes the world such a rotten place to live in is because the people are starved all the while for beauty. Not beauty you can buy, but beauty like this around us, that you can feast on —"

"And I get pretty well fed up on it, too, sometimes," Jack put in, still perverse.

"And for that I pity you. I was going to wash the dishes, but you can do it yourself. I'm going out where I can forget there are any people in the world. I'll never have another night like this — it would be too much luck for one person."

She set down her cup, which she had been tilting back and forth in her fingers while she spoke. She got up, pulled Jack's heavy sweater off a nail in the corner, and went out without another word to him or a look toward him. She seemed to be absolutely sincere in her calm disposal of him as something superfluous and annoying. She seemed also to be just as sincere in her desire for a close companionship with the solitude that surrounded them.

Jack looked after her, puzzled. But he had discovered too many contradictory moods and emotions in his own nature to puzzle long over Marion's sudden changes. Three months ago he would have called her crazy, or accused her of posing. Now, however, he understood well enough the spell of that tremendous view. He had felt it too often and too deeply to grudge her one long feast for her imagination. So he took her at her word and let her go.

He tidied the small room and sent in another report of the headlong rush of the fire and the direction of the wind that fanned it. He learned that all Genessee was out, fighting to keep the flames from sweeping down across the valley. Three hundred men were fighting it, the supervisor told him. They would check it on the downhill slope, where it would burn more slowly; and if the wind did not change in the night it would probably be brought under control by morning. After that the supervisor very discreetly inquired after the welfare of the young lady who had telephoned. Had she found any means of getting back to her camp, or of sending any word?

Jack replied she had not, and that there was no likelihood of her getting away before daylight. There were too many burning trees and stumps and brush piles on the ground in the burned strip, he explained. It would bother a man to get down there now. But he offered to try it, if he might be excused from the station for a few hours. He said he would be willing to go down and tell them she was all right, or, a little later, he might even take a chance of getting her across. But it would take some time, he was afraid.

Ross seemed to consider the matter for a minute. Then, " N — o, as long as she's up there, she'd better stay. We can't spare you to go. You might call her to the phone —"

" I can't. She's off somewhere on the peak, taking in the view," Jack replied. " She grabbed my sweater and beat it, an hour or so ago, and I don't know where she went. . . . No, I don't think she tried that. She knows she couldn't get there. She said she wanted to see all she could of it while she had the chance. . . . What? . . . Oh, sure, she's got sense enough to take care of herself, far as that goes. Seems to be one of the independent kind. . . . All right. I'll call up if she comes back, and she can talk to you herself."

But he did not call up the supervisor, for Marion did not come back. At daybreak, when Jack could no longer fight down his uneasiness, and went to look for her, he found her crouched between two boulders that offered some shelter from the wind without obstructing the view. She was huddled in his sweater, shivering a little with the dawn chill but scarcely conscious of the fact that she was cold. Her lids were red-rimmed from staring up too long, at the near stars and down at the remote mountains — as they looked to be that night. She seemed rather to resent interruption, but in a few minutes she became human and practical enough to admit that she was hungry, and that she supposed it was time to think about getting home.

When she got up to follow Jack to the station, she walked stiffly because of her cramped muscles; but she didn't seem to mind that in the least. She made only one comment upon her vigil, and that was when she stopped in the door of the station and looked back at the heaving cloud of smoke that filled the eastern sky.

"Well, whatever happens to me from now on, I'll have the comfort of knowing that for a few hours I have been absolutely happy." Then, with the abruptness that marked her changes of mood, she became the slangy, pert, feather-headed Marion Rose whom Jack had met first; and remained so until she left him after breakfast to go home to Kate, who would be perfectly wild.

CHAPTER TWELVE

KATE FINDS SOMETHING TO WORRY OVER

KATE may have been wild, but if so she managed to maintain an admirable composure when Marion walked up to the door of the cabin. She did not greet her best friend with hysterical rejoicings, probably because she had been told of her best friend's safety soon after dark the night before, and had since found much to resent in Marion's predicament and the worry which she had suffered before Marion's message came.

"Well!" she said, and continued brushing her hair. "Have you had any breakfast?"

"Ages ago. Where's everybody?" Marion flung down her hat and made straight for the hammock.

"Helping put out the forest fire, I suppose. They had to go last night, and I was left all alone. I hope I may never pass as horrible a night again. I did not sleep one minute. I was so nervous that I never closed my eyes. I walked the floor practically all night."

"Forevermore!" Marion murmured from the hammock, her cheek dropped upon an arm. "I simply ruined my shoes, Kate, walking through all those ashes and burnt stuff. You've no idea how long it stays hot. I wonder what would soften the leather again. Have we any vaseline?"

Kate looked at her a minute and gave a sigh of resignation. "Sometimes I really envy you your absolute lack of the finer sensibilities, Marion. I should not have suffered so last night, worrying about you, if I were gifted with your lack of temperament. Yes, I believe we have a jar of vaseline, if that is what worries you most. But for my part, I should think other things would concern you more."

"Why shouldn't it concern me to spoil a pair of nine dollar shoes? I don't suppose I could get any like them in Quincy, and you know what a time I had getting fitted in Hamburger's. And besides, I couldn't afford another pair; not till we sell our trees anyway."

"How is the fire? Are they getting it put out?" Kate's face was veiled behind her hair.

"I don't know, it is down the other side of the mountain now. But three hundred men are fighting it, Jack said, so I suppose —"

"Jack!" With a spread of her two palms like a swimmer cleaving the water, Kate parted her veil of hair and looked out at the girl. "Jack who? Is that the man up at the lookout station, that you —"

"He's not a man. He's just a big, handsome, sulky kid. When he's cross he pulls his eyebrows together so there's a little lump between them. You want to pinch it. And when he smiles he's got the sweetest expression around his mouth, Kate! As if he was just so full of the old nick he couldn't behave if he tried. You know — little quirky creases at the corners, and a twinkle in his eyes — oh, good night! He's just so good looking, honestly, it's a sin. But his disposition is spoiled. He gets awfully grouchy over the least little thing —"

"Marion, how old is he?" Kate had been holding her hair away from her face and staring all the while with shocked eyes at Marion.

"Oh, I don't know — old enough to drive a girl perfectly crazy if he smiled at her often enough. Do you want to go up and meet him? He'd like you, Kate — you're so superior. He simply can't stand me, I'm such a mental lightweight. His eyes keep saying, 'So young and lovely, and — nobody home,' when he looks at me. You go, Kate. Take him up a loaf of bread; that he had brought from town tastes sour."

"Marion, I don't believe a word you're saying! I can tell by your eyes when you're trying to throw me off the track. But old or young, handsome or ugly, it was a dreadful thing for you to spend the night up there, alone with a strange man. I simply walked the floor all night, worrying about you! I'd have gone up there in spite of the altitude, if the fire had not been between. I only hope Fred and the professor don't get to hear of it. I was so afraid they would reach home before you did! But since they didn't, there's no need of saying anything about it. They left right away, before any of us had gotten anxious about you. If the man who told me doesn't blurt it to every one he sees — what in the world possessed you, Marion, to phone down to the Forest Service that you were up there and going to stay?"

"Well, forevermore!" Marion lifted her head from her arm to stare at Kate. Then she laughed and lay back luxuriously. "I was afraid you wouldn't know where to look for the bread," she explained meekly, and turned her face away from the sunlight and took a nap.

Kate finished with her hair rather abruptly, considering the leisurely manner in which she had been brushing it. She glanced often at Marion sprawled gracefully and unconventionally in the hammock with one cinder-blackened boot sticking boyishly out over the edge. Kate's eyes held an expression of baffled curiosity. They often held that expression when she looked at Marion.

But presently the professor came, dragging his feet wearily and mopping his soot-blackened face with a handkerchief as black. He gave the hammock a longing look, as though he had been counting on easing his aching body into it. Seeing Marion there asleep, he dropped to the pine needle carpet under a great tree, and began to fan himself with his stiff-brimmed straw hat that was grimed with smoke and torn by branches.

"By George!" he exlaimed, glancing toward Kate as she came hurrying from the cabin. "That was an ordeal!"

"Oh, did you get it put out? And where is Fred? Shall I make you some lemonade, Douglas?"

"A glass of lemonade would be refreshing, Kate, after the experience I have gone through. By George! A forest fire is a tremendous problem, once the conflagration attains any size. We worked like galley slaves all night long, with absolutely no respite. Fred, by the way, is still working like a demon."

While Kate was hurrying lemons and sugar into a pitcher, the professor reclined his work-wearied body upon the pine needles and cast hungry glances toward the hammock. He cleared his throat loudly once or twice, and soliloquized aloud: "By George! I wish I could stretch out comfortably somewhere."

But Marion did not hear him — apparently being asleep; though the professor wondered how one could sleep and at the same time keep a hammock swinging with one's toes, as Marion was doing. He cleared his throat again, sighed and inquired mildly: "Are you asleep, Marion?" Getting no answer, he sighed again and hitched himself closer to the tree, so that a certain protruding root should not gouge him so disagreeably in the side.

"Shall I fix you something to eat, Douglas?" The voice of Kate crooned over him solicitously. "I can poach you a couple of eggs in just a minute, over the oil stove, and make you a cup of tea. Is the fire out? And, oh, Douglas! Has it burned any of our timber? I have been so worried, I did not close my eyes once, all night."

"Our timber is safe, I'm happy to say. It really is safer, if anything, than it was before the fire started. There will be no further possibility of fire creeping upon us from that quarter." He quaffed the lemonade with little, restrained sighs of enjoyment. "It also occurred to me that every forest fire must necessarily increase the value of what timber is left. I should say then, strictly between you and me, Kate, that this fire may be looked upon privately as an asset."

The hammock gave an extra swing and then stopped. Kate, being somewhat sensitive to a third presence when she and the professor were talking together, looked fixedly at the hammock.

"If you are awake, dear, it would be tremendously thoughtful to let the professor have the hammock for a while. He is utterly exhausted from fighting fire all night," she said with sugar-coated annoyance in her tone.

"Oh, don't disturb her — I'm doing very well here for the present," the professor made feeble protest when Marion showed no sign of having heard the hint. "Let the child sleep."

"The child certainly needs sleep, if I am any judge," Kate snapped pettishly, and closed her lips upon further revelations. "Shall I poach you some eggs? And then if the child continues to sleep, I suppose we can bring your cot out under the trees. It is terribly stuffy in the tent. You'd roast."

"Please don't put yourself to any inconvenience at all, Kate. I am really not hungry at all. Provisions were furnished those who fought the fire. I had coffee, and a really substantial breakfast before I left them. I shall lie here for a while and enjoy the luxury of doing nothing for a while. By George, Kate! The Forest Service certainly does make a man work! Think of felling trees all night long! That is the way they go about it, I find. They cut down trees and clear away a strip across the front of the fire where there seems to be the greatest possibility of keeping the flames from jumping across. They even go so far as to rake back the pine needles and dry cones as thoroughly as possible, and in that manner they prevent the flames from creeping along the ground. It is really wonderfully effective when they can get to work in the light growth. I was astounded to see what may be accomplished with axes and picks and rakes and shovels. But it is work, though. By George, it is work!"

"Don't try to root in those needles for a soft spot," Kate advised him practically. "Not when some persons have more cushions than they need or can use." Whereupon she went over and took two pillows from under Marion's feet, and pulled another from under her shoulder.

These made the professor comfortable enough. He lay back smiling gratefully — even affectionately — upon her.

"You certainly do know how to make a man glad that he is alive," he thanked her. "Now, if I could lie here and look up through these branches and listen while a dear little woman I know recites Shelley's *The Cloud,* I could feel that paradise holds no greater joys than this sheltered little vale."

The hammock became suddenly and violently agitated. Marion was turning over with a movement that, in one less gracefully slim, might be called a flop.

"Well, good night! I hope you'll excuse me, Kate, for beating it," she said, sitting up. "But I've heard *The Cloud* till I could say it backwards with my tongue paralyzed. I'll go down by the creek and finish my sleep." She took the three remaining cushions under her arms and departed. At the creek she paused, her ear turned toward the shady spot beyond the cabin. She heard Kate's elocutionary voice declaiming brightly:

"From my wings are shaken the dews that waken
The sweet buds, every one —"

She went on a little farther, until she could hear only the higher tones of Kate's voice above the happy gurgle of the stream. She scrambled through a willow tangle, stopped on the farther side to listen, and smiled when the water talked to her with no interruption of human voices.

"And Doug thinks he's a real nature lover!" she commented, throwing her cushions down into a grassy little hollow under the bank. "But if he would rather hear Kate elocute about it than to lie and listen to the real thing, he's nothing more or less than a nature pirate." She curled herself down among the cushions and stared up through the slender willow branches into the top of an alder that leaned over the bank and dangled its finger-tip branches playfully toward her.

"You pretty thing!" she cooed to it. "What does ail people, that they sit around and talk about you and make up rhymes about you, when you just want them to come out and love you! You darling! Words only make you cheap. Now whisper to me, all about when you woke up last spring and found the sun warm and waiting — Go on — tell me about it, and what you said to the creek, and all."

Having listened to Kate's dramatic rendition of the poem he liked, the professor went over and made himself comfortable in the hammock and began talking again about the fire. It was a magnificent spectacle, he declared, although he was really too close to it to obtain the best view. A lot of fine timber was ruined, of course; but fortunately not a tree on any of their claims had been touched. The wind had blown the flames in another direction.

"It would have been terrible to have a fire start in our timber," he went on. "We should lose all that we have put into the venture so far — and that would mean a good deal to us all. As it stands now, we have had a narrow escape. Did you go up where you could obtain a view of the fire, Kate?"

"No, I didn't." Kate poured herself out a glass of lemonade. "I was so worried about Marion I couldn't think of anything else. And when the man stopped and told me where she was, it was dark and I was afraid to go off alone. Douglas, I never spent as miserable a night in all my life. The tremendous risk you and Fred were taking made me fairly wild with anxiety — and then Marion's performance coming up on top of that —"

"What was Marion's performance? Did she sit by the creek again until after dark, refusing to stir?" He smiled tolerantly. "I know how trying Marion's little peculiarities can be. But you surely wouldn't take them seriously, Kate."

"Oh, no, I suppose not. But when it comes to getting herself caught on the other side of the fire, and going up to that lookout station and staying all night, and nobody up there except the lookout man —"

"No! By George, did she do that?"

"Yes, she did, and I think it's perfectly awful! I don't suppose she could get back, after the fire got started," she admitted grudgingly, "but she might have done *something,* don't you think? She could have gone down the other side, it seems to me. I know I'd have gotten back somehow. And what hurts me, Douglas, is the way she passed it over, as though it was nothing!

She knew how worried I was, and she didn't seem to care at all. She made a joke of it."

"Well! By George, I am surprised. But Marion is inclined to be a trifle self-centered, I have noticed. Probably she doesn't realize your point of view at all. I am sure she likes you too much to hurt you deliberately, Kate. And young people nowadays have such different standards of morals. She may actually feel that it isn't shocking, and she may be hurt at your apparent lack of confidence in her."

"She couldn't possibly think that." Kate was too loyal at heart to contemplate that possibility for a moment. "Marion knows better than that. But it does hurt me to see her so careless of her own dignity and good name. We're strangers in this community, and people are going to judge us by appearances. They have nothing else to go by. I care more for Marion, it seems to me, than she cares for herself. Why, Douglas, that girl even telephoned down to the Forest Service that she was up there and going to stay, and wanted them to send word to me. And they are men in that office — human beings, that are bound to think things. What *can* they think, not knowing Marion at all, and just judging by appearances?"

"I suppose they understood perfectly that it would be impossible for her to get home across the fire, Kate.

By George! I can see myself that she couldn't do it. I shouldn't blame the girl for that, Kate. And I can see also that it was a consideration for you that prompted her to send word in the only way she could. Poor girl, you are completely worn out. Now be a good girl and go in and rest, and don't worry any more about it. I shall stay here and keep an eye on camp — and I want you to promise that you will lie down and take a good, long sleep. Go — you need it more than you realize."

Tears — unreasoning, woman tears — stood in Kate's eyes at the tender solicitude of his tone. Very submissively she picked up the pitcher and the glasses and went into the cabin. The professor sighed when she was gone, kneaded the pillows into a more comfortable position and proceeded to keep an eye on camp by falling into so sound a sleep that within five minutes he was snoring gently. It would be cruel to suspect him of wanting to be rid of Kate and her troubles so that he could sleep, but he certainly lost no time in profiting by her absence. Nature had skimped her material when she fashioned Professor Harrison. He was not much taller than Kate — not so tall as Marion by a full inch — and he was narrow shouldered and shallow chested, with thin, bony wrists and a bulging forehead that seemed to bulge worse than it really did because of his scanty growth of hair. He was a kind hearted little man, but the forest rangers had worked him hard all night. One cannot blame him for wanting to sleep in peace, with no sound but the gurgle of the creek two rods away, and the warbling call of a little, yellow-breasted bird in the alders near by.

It was Fred Humphrey tramping wearily into camp three hours later, who awoke him. Fred was an altogether different type of man, and he was not so careful to conceal his own desires. Just now he was hungry, and so he called for Kate. Moreover, he had with him two men, and they were just as hungry as he was, even if they did suppress the fact politely.

"Oh, Kate! Can you scare up something right away for us to eat? Make a lot of coffee, will you? And never mind fancy fixings — real grub is what we want right now. Where's Marion? She can help you get it ready, can't she?"

Kate was heard moving inside the cabin when Fred first called her. Now she looked out of the door, and dodged back embarrassed when she saw the two strangers. She was in a kimono, and had her hair down; evidently she had obeyed the professor implicitly in the matter of going to sleep.

"Oh!" she said, "I don't know where Marion is — as usual; but I can have luncheon ready in a very short time, I'm sure. Is the fire —"

"'Luncheon!'" snorted Fred, laughing a little. "Don't you palm off any luncheon on us! That sounds like a dab of salad and a dab of sauce and two peas in a platter and a prayer for dinner to hurry up and come around! Cook us some grub, old girl — lots of it. Coffee and bacon and flour gravy and spuds. We'd rather wait a few minutes longer and get a square meal, wouldn't we, boys? Make yourselves at home. There's all the ground there is, to sit down on, and there's the whole creek to wash in, if the basin down there is too small. I'm going to get some clean clothes and go down to the big hole and take a plunge. How long will it be before chuck's ready, Kate?"

Kate told him half an hour, and he went off down the creek, keeping at the edge of the little meadow, with a change of clothing under his arm and a big bath towel hung over his shoulder. The two men followed him listlessly, too tired, evidently, to care much what they did.

Fred, leading the way, plunged through the willow fringe and came upon the creek bank three feet from where Marion lay curled up on her cushions. He stood for a minute looking down at her before his present, material needs dominated his admiration of her beauty — for beautiful she was, lying there in a nest of green, with her yellow hair falling loosely about her face.

"Hello! Asleep?" he called to her, much as he had called to Kate. "Afraid we'll have to ask you to move on, sister. We want to take a swim right here. And anyway, Kate wants you right away, quick. Wake up, like a good girl, and run along."

"I don't want to wake up. Go away and let me sleep." Marion opened her eyes long enough to make sure that he was standing right there waiting, and closed them again. "Go somewhere else and swim. There's lots of creek that isn't in use."

"No sir, by heck, I'm going to take my swim right here. I'm too doggone tired to walk another yard. Suit yourself about going, though. Don't let me hurry you at all." He sat down and began to unlace his shoes, grinning back over his shoulder at the other two who had not ventured down to the creek when they heard the voice of a woman there.

Marion sat up indignantly. "Go on down the creek, why don't you?"

"Oh, this place suits me fine." Fred, having removed one shoe, turned it upside down and shook out the sand, and began unlacing the other.

Marion waited stubbornly until he was pulling that shoe off, and then she gathered up her cushions and fled, flushed and angry. She was frequently angry with Fred, who never yielded an inch and never would argue or cajole. She firmly believed that Fred would actually have gone in swimming with her sitting there on the bank; he was just that stubborn. For that she sometimes hated him — since no one detests stubbornness so much as an obstinate person.

Fred looked after her, still smiling oddly because he had known so well how to persuade her to go back to the house and help Kate. Fred almost loved Marion Rose. He admitted to himself that he almost loved her — which is going pretty far for a man like Fred Humphrey. But he also admitted to himself that she could not make him happy, nor he her. To make Marion happy he believed that he would need to have about a million dollars to spend. To make him happy, Marion would need to take a little more interest in home making and not so much interest in beauty making. The frivolous vanity bag of hers, and her bland way of using it, like the movie actresses, in public, served to check his imagination before it actually began building air-castles wherein she reigned the queen.

He could have loved her so faithfully if only she were a little different! The nearest he came to building an air-castle was when he was lying luxuriously in a shallow part of the pool, where the water was not so cold.

“ She’d be different, I believe — I’d make her different, if I could just have her to myself," he mused. "I'd take a lot of that foolishness out of her in a little while, and I wouldn't have to be rough with her, either. All she needs is a man she can't bluff!"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

JACK SHOULD HAVE A HIDE-OUT

KATE, like the rest of the world, pretended to herself a good deal. For instance, when she came into the mountains, she had hoped that Fred and Marion would fall in love and get married. She felt that the arrangement would be perfectly ideal in every way. Marion was such a dear girl, so sweet-tempered and light-hearted; just the temperament that Fred needed in a wife, to save him from becoming mentally heavy and stolid and too unemotional. Fred was so matter-of-fact! Her eagerness to have Marion come into the mining-claim scheme had not been altogether a friendly desire for companionship, as she pretended. Deep in the back of her mind was the matchmaker's belief that propinquity would prove a mighty factor in bringing these two together in marriage. If they did marry, that would throw Marion's timber land with Fred's and give Fred a good bit more than he would have with his own claim alone, which was another reason why Kate had considered their marriage an ideal arrangement.

Three weeks had changed Kate's desire, however.

Three weeks is a long time for two women to spend in one small cabin together with almost no intercourse with the outside world. Little by little, Kate's opinion of Marion had changed considerably. To go to shows with Marion, to have her at the house for dinner and to spend a night now and then, to lie relaxed upon a cot in the Martha Washington's beauty booth while Marion ministered to her with soothing fingertips and agreeable chatter, was one thing; to live uncomfortably — albeit picturesquely — with Marion in a log cabin in the woods was quite another thing.

Kate began to doubt whether Marion would make a suitable wife for Fred. She had discovered that Marion was selfish, for one thing; being selfish, she was also mercenary. Kate began to fear that Marion had designs upon Fred for the sake of his timber claim; which was altogether different, of course, from Kate's designs upon Marion's timber claim! Besides, Marion was inclined to shirk her share of the cooking and dishwashing, and when she made their bed and tidied the crude little room they called their bedroom, she never so much as pretended to hang up Kate's clothes. She would appropriate the nails on the wall to her own uses, and lay Kate's clothes on Kate's trunk and let it go at that. Any woman, Kate told herself, would resent such treatment.

Then Marion was always going off alone and never asking Kate if she would like to go along. That was inconsiderate, to say the least. And look how she had acted about climbing the peak at Mount Hough, the day they had gone to see the lake! Kate had wanted to go down to the lake — but no — Marion had declared that it was more beautiful from the rim, and had insisted upon climbing clear to the top of the peak, when she knew perfectly well that the altitude was affecting Kate's heart. And she had gone off alone and stayed nearly two hours, so that they were almost caught in the dark on the way home. It was the most selfish thing Kate had ever heard of — until Marion perpetrated worse selfishness which paled the incident.

More than that, Marion was always making little, sneering remarks about the professor, and doing little things to annoy him. Kate could not see how any one could do that, kind as Douglas was, and courteous. And there were times when Marion seemed actually to be trying to interest Fred; other times she purposely irritated him, as though she were deliberately amusing herself with him. All this was not taking into account Marion's penurious habit of charging Kate for every facial massage and every manicure she gave her. When Kate looked ahead to the long winter they must spend together in that cabin, she was tempted to feel as though she, for one, would be paying an exorbitant price for her timber claim.

With all that tucked away in the back of her mind, Kate still believed — or at least she successfully pretended to believe — that she liked Marion personally as much as she ever had liked her. She did not see why any one must be absolutely blind to the faults of a friend. She merely recognized Marion's faults. But if she ever criticised, she condoned the criticism by saying that it was for Marion's own best interests.

Just now, while she cleared away the litter of Fred's dinner, she meditated upon the proper manner of dealing with Marion's latest defection. Should she warn the professor to say nothing to Fred? It might turn Fred against Marion to know what she had done; Fred was so queer and old-fashioned about women. Still, he would be sure to hear of it somehow, and it might be best to tell him herself, as tactfully as possible, because she knew so well just how best to approach Fred. She told Fred and was amazed at the result.

"Well, what of it?" Fred demanded with brotherly bluntness. "It takes a woman, by thunder, to knife her friends in the back. What are you trying to build up anyway? Take it from me, old girl, you want to cut out this picking away at Marion behind her back — or to her face, either, for that matter. You two women are going to see a good deal of each other between now and spring, and you'll be ready to claw each other's eyes out if you don't shut them to a lot you don't like."

"Well, upon my word! I was merely telling you of Marion's adventure. I'm not saying —"

"No, but you're thinking, and you want to quit it." Whereupon Fred went off to his tent and indulged in a much needed siesta.

Kate was angry as well as hurt. The injustice of Fred's condemnation stirred her to action. She got hurriedly into her khaki skirt and tramping shoes, slung a canteen over her shoulder, tied her green veil over her hat and under her chin, put on her amber sun-glasses, and took her stout walking stick.

She was careful not to wake Fred or the professor, though that would have been more difficult than she imagined. She did not want them to know where she was going. If they missed her and were worried it would serve them both right; for now she remembered that the professor had also been very unsympathetic. Neither of them had seemed to realize what a terrible night she had spent there alone, with that terrible fire raging through the forest and with Marion gone, without saying one word to Kate about where she was going or when she expected to return.

She meant to climb Mount Hough in spite of the altitude, and find out for herself what sort of a fellow that lookout man was. Fred and Douglas might make light of the matter if they wished, but she was in a sense responsible for Marion Rose, and she considered it her duty to think of the girl's welfare.

There was a good deal of determination in Kate's character, once you roused her out of herself. She climbed Mount Hough, but she did not find out what sort of a fellow the lookout man was, for Jack heard her puffing up the pack trail and retired, with the precipitateness of a hunted fox, to his niche between the boulders. She did not stay long. As soon as she had rested a little and made sure that the station door was locked, and had peered in and seen that everything was in perfect order, she decided that the lookout man was probably off fighting fire with the rest of the forest rangers. Convinced of that, she straightway jumped to the conclusion that he had not been there at all since the fire started, and Marion must have stayed up there alone, and she had simply been trying to worry Kate over nothing.

Well, at any rate, she couldn't play that trick the second time. Kate felt well repaid for the climb even if she did not get a glimpse of the lookout man. Let Marion pretend, if she wanted to. Let her rave about the lookout man's mouth and eyes and temper; Kate was armed against all future baitings. She could go back now and be mistress of the situation.

So she went, and Jack listened to her retreating footsteps scrunching down the trail, and heaved a deep sigh of relief when the silence flowed in behind her and the mountain top was all his own. Nevertheless he felt uneasy over the incident. Kate, climbing alone to the station, trying the door, waiting around for a few minutes and then going back the way she had come, did not strike Jack as being a tourist come to view the scenery. So far as he had been able to judge as he peeped out through a narrow rift in the ledge, she had paid very little attention to the scenery. She seemed chiefly concerned with the station, and her concern seemed mostly an impatience over its locked door.

He got his telescope and watched her as she came down through the rocks into sight. No, she certainly did not strike him as being a tourist, in spite of her tourist's khaki and amber glasses and heavy tan boots. Women tourists did not climb mountains without an escort of some kind, he had learned.

"By heck, I'll bet that's Kate!" he exclaimed suddenly, staring at her retreating form. "Now, what does the old girl want — ?" Straightway he guessed what she wanted, and the guess brought his eyebrows together with the lump between which Marion had described. If she had come up there to see *him,* it must be because she had heard something about him that had stirred her up considerably. He remembered how she had refused to climb the peak with Marion, that first afternoon.

You know how self-conscious a secret makes a person. Jack could think of only one reason why Kate should climb away up there to see him. She must know who he was, and had come up to settle any doubt in her mind before she did anything. If she knew who he was, then Marion Rose must have told her. And if Marion Rose had gone straight and told her friends —

Jack went so far as to pack everything he owned into his suitcase and carry it to the niche in the ledge. He would not stay and give her the satisfaction of sending the sheriff up there. He was a headlong youth, much given to hasty judgments. All that night he hated Marion Rose worse than he had ever hated any one in his life. He did not leave, however. He could not quite bring himself to the point of leaving while his beloved mountain was being scarred with fire. He knew that it was for the sake of having him there in just such an emergency as this fire that the government paid him a salary. Headlong as was his nature, there was in him the quality of being loyal to a trust. He could make all preparations for leaving — but until the fire was out and the forest safe for the time being, he could not go.

Then, quite early the next day, Marion herself came up the trail with three movie magazines and a loaf of bread that she had purloined from Kate's makeshift pantry. On this day she was not so frivolous, but helpful and full of sympathy. Jack could not believe that she had told his secret to Kate; and because he could not believe it he asked her point blank whether Kate had come spying up there deliberately, and was vastly reassured by Marion's vehement denial.

They worked out a heliograph code that day, and they planned an exploring trip to Taylor Rock the next time Jack was relieved. It seemed very important that Jack should have a picturesque hide-out there; a secret cave, perhaps, with a tilting rock to cover the doorway.

"It would be great," declared Marion, clasping her hands together with her favorite ecstatic gesture. "If we could just find a cave with a spring away back in it, don't you know, and a ledge outside where you could watch for enemies — wouldn't that be keen? It makes me wish I had done something, so I had to hide out in the hills. And every day at a certain time, I can come up here where that hydrometer thing was before it burned, and signal to you. And we'll find a place where I can leave magazines and things like that, and you can come and get them. Honestly, I've always wished I could be an outlaw — if I could be one without doing anything really bad, you know. I'd love having to live in a cave somewhere. You're lucky, Jack — Johnny Carew — if you only knew it."

"I do know it. I never found it out till today, though," Jack told her with what he fancied was an enigmatic smile.

"Now listen. If you want me to help you enjoy being an outlaw, Jack Corey, you simply must cut out the sentimental stuff. Let me tell you how I feel about it. It's nothing new to have men make love — any kind of a man will sit up and say 'bow-wow' if you snap your fingers at him. That's deadly common. But here you are, a bandit and an outlaw without being bad or tough — I don't think you are, anyway. You didn't do such awful things to get in bad with the law, you see. But you're hiding out just the same, with the police sleuthing around after you, and disowned by your mother and all, just like the real thing. Why, it's a story in real life! And I want to live in that story, too, and help you just like a book heroine. I think we can make it awfully interesting, being real enough so it isn't just make-believe. It's keen, I tell you. But for once I want to see if a boy and a girl can't cut out the love interest and be just good pals, like two boys together." Marion got up and stood before him, plainly as ready to go as to stay. "If you'll agree to that I'll go and help you find your cave. Otherwise, I'll go back to camp and stay there, and you can look after yourself."

"Be calm! Be calm!" Jack pushed back his mop of hair and grinned derisively. "You should worry about any lovemaking from me. Take the bunch out at the beach, or at a dance, and I can rattle off the sentimental patter to beat the band. But it doesn't seem to fit in up here — unless a fellow meant it honest-to-goodness. And I ain't going to mean it, my dear girl. Not with you. I like you as a friend, but I fear I can never be more than a step-brother to you." He pulled off a dead twig from the bush beside him, snapped it in two and flipped the pieces down the slope. "I'd look nice, making love to a girl, the fix I'm in!" he added with a savage bitterness that gave the lie to his smiling indifference. "A fellow ought to make sure his canoe is going to stay right side up before he asks a girl to step into it."

"That's all right then. It's best to understand each other. Now, if I were you, I'd have things brought up here, a little at a time, that you'll need for your secret camp. Groceries, you know, and things. You can make a place to keep them in till you get your vacation

— and listen! When I go to town I can buy you things that would look queer if you sent for them. Towels and napkins and —"

Jack gave a whoop at that, though his ignorance of primitive living did not fall far short of hers. But in the main, he took her advice with praiseworthy gratitude. He had never expected to enjoy being an outlaw. But under the influence of her enthusiasm and his own youthfulness, he began to take a certain interest in the details of her scheme — to plan with her as though it was going to be merely a camping out for pleasure. That, of course, was the boy in him rising to the bait of a secret cave in the mountains, and exchanging heliograph signals with the heroine of the adventure, and lying upon a ledge before his cave watching for enemies. There would be the bears, too, that Hank Brown had said would be ambling up there to their winter quarters. And there would be the scream of the mountain lions — Jack had more than once heard them at night down in the forest below him, and had thrilled to the sound. He would stalk the shy deer and carry meat to his cave and broil the flesh over his tiny campfire — don't tell me that the boy in any normal young man would not rise enthusiastically to that bait!

But there were other times, when Marion was not there; when Jack was alone with the stars and the dark bulk of the wooded slopes beneath him; times when the adventure paled and grew bleak before his soul, so that he shrank from it appalled. Times when he could not shut out the picture of the proud, stately Mrs. Singleton Corey, hiding humiliated and broken of spirit in a sanatorium, shamed before the world because he was her son. Not all the secret caves the mountains held could dull the pain of that thought when it assailed him in the dark stillness of the peak.

For Jack was her true offspring in pride, if no more. He had been a sensitive youngster who had resented passionately his mother's slights upon his vague memory of the dad who had given him his adventurous spirit and his rebellion against the restraints of mere convention, which was his mother's dearest god. Unknown to Mrs. Singleton Corey, he had ardently espoused the cause of his wandering dad, and had withdrawn his love from the arrogant lady-mother, who never once spoke affectionately of the man Jack loved. He had taken what money she gave him. It was his dad's money, for his dad had suffered hardship to wrest it from the earth, in the mines that kept Mrs. Singleton Corey in soft, perfumed luxury. His dad would have wanted Jack to have it, so Jack took all she would give him and did not feel particularly grateful to her because she was fairly generous in giving.

But now the very pride that he had inherited from her turned upon him the savage weapons of memory. He had swift visions of his mother mounting the steps of some mansion, going graciously to make a fashionable ten-minute call upon some friend, while Jack played chauffeur for the occasion. She couldn't go calling now on the Westlake millionaires' wives, taunted memory. Neither could she preside at the club teas; nor invite forty or fifty twittery women into her big double parlors and queen it over them as Jack had so often seen her do. She could not do any of the things that had made up her life, and Jack was the reason why she could not do them.

He tried to shut out the picture of his mother, and there were times when for a few hours he succeeded. Those were the hours he spent with Marion or in watching for her to come, or in perfecting the details of the plan she had helped him to form. By the time he had his next four days of freedom, he had also a good-sized cache of food ready to carry to Grizzly Peak where his makeshift camping outfit was hidden. Marion had told him that when the fire-season was over and the lookout station closed for the winter, which would be when the first snow had come to stay, he ought to be ready to disappear altogether from the ken of the Forest Service and all of the rest of Quincy.

"You can say you're going prospecting," she planned, "and then beat it to your cave and make it snug for the winter. Anything you must buy after that, you can tell me about it, and I'll manage to get it and leave it for you at our secret meeting place. I don't know how I'll manage about Kate, but I'll manage somehow — and that'll be fun, too. Kate will be perfectly wild if she sees me doing mysterious things — but she won't find out what it's all about, and I'll have more fun! I do love to badger her, poor thing. She's a dear, really, you know. But she wants to know everything a person does and says and thinks; and she hasn't any more imagination than a white rabbit, and so she wouldn't understand if you told her every little thing.

"So I'll have the time of my life doing it, but I'll get things just the same, and leave them for you. And I'll bring you reading — oh, have you put down candles, Jack? You'll need a lot of them, so you can read evenings."

"What's the matter with pine knots?" Jack inquired. "Daniel Boone was great on pine-knot torches, if I remember right. One thing I wish you would do, Marion. I'll give you the money to send for about a million Araby cigarettes. I'll write down the address — where I always bought them. Think you could get by with it?"

"You just watch me. Say, I do think this is going to be the best kind of a winter! I wouldn't miss being up here for anything."

Jack looked at her doubtfully, but he finally nodded his head in assent. "It could be worse," he qualified optimistically.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

MURPHY HAS A HUMOROUS MOOD

THOUGH Fred and the professor shouldered pick and shovel at sunrise every morning and laid them down thankfully at dusk every night, they could not hope to work out the assessment upon eight mining claims in a year. The professor was not a success as a pick-and-shovel man, though he did his best. He acquired a row of callouses on each hand and a chronic ache in his back, but beyond that he did not accomplish very much. Fred was really the brawn of the undertaking, and in a practical way he was the brains also. Fred saw at once that the task required more muscle than he and the professor could furnish, so he hired a couple of men and set them to work on the claims of the speculators.

Two little old Irishmen, these were; men who had dried down to pure muscle and bone as to their bodies, and to pure mining craft and tenacious memory for the details of their narrow lives as to brains. The mountains produce such men. In the barren plains country they would be called desert rats, but in the mountains they are called prospectors.

They set up their own camp half a mile down the creek, so that Kate and Marion seldom saw them. They did their own cooking and divided their work to suit themselves, and they did not charge as much for their labor as Fred charged the claim-owners for the work, so Fred considered that he had done very well in hiring them. He could turn his attention to his own claim and the claims of Marion and Kate, and let the professor peck away at a hole in the hillside where he vaguely hoped to find gold. Why not? People did, in these mountains. Why, nuggets of gold had been picked up in the main street of Quincy, so they told him. One man in town had solemnly assured him that all these hills were "lousy with gold"; and while the professor did not like the phrase, he did like the heartening assurance it bore to his wistful heart, and he began examining his twenty-acre claim with a new interest. Surely the early-day miners had not gleaned *all* the gold! Why, nearly every time he talked with any of the natives he heard of fresh strikes. Old prospectors like Murphy and Mike were always coming in town for supplies and then hurrying back to far canyons where they fully expected to become rich.

The professor got a book on mineralogy and read it faithfully. Certain points which he was not sure that he understood he memorized and meant to ask

Murphy, who had a memory like a trap and had mined from Mexico to Alaska and from Montana to the sea.

Murphy poised his shovel, since he happened to be working, twinkled his eyes at the professor through thick, silver-rimmed glasses, and demanded: "For why do ye be readin' a buke about it? For why don't ye get down wit yer pick, man, and *see* what's in the ground? My gorry, I been minin' now for forty-wan year, ever sence I come from the auld country, an' *I* never read no buke t' see what I had in me claim. I got down inty the ground, an' I seen for meself what I got there — an' whin I found out, my gorry, I didn't need no *buke* t' tell me was she wort' the powder I'd put inty 'er. An' them that made their millions outy their mines, *they* didn't go walkin' around wit' a buke in their hands! My gorry, they hired jackasses like me an' Mike here t' dig fer all they wanted t' know about.

"And if ye want to find out what's there in yer claim, I'd advise ye t' throw away yer buke, young feller, an' git busy wit' yer two hands, an' ye'll be like t' know a dom sight more than wit' all yer readin'. An' if ye like to bring me a sample of what ye git, I'll be the wan t' tell ye by sight what ye have, and I don't need no *buke* t' tell it by nayther."

Whereat Mike, who was silly from being struck on the head with a railroad tie somewhere down the long trail of years behind him, gulped his lean Adam's apple into a laugh, and began to gobble a long, rambling tale about a feller he knew once in Minnesota who could locate mines with a crooked stick, and wherever he pinted the stick you could dig. . . .

Murphy sat down upon him then — figuratively speaking — and reminded Mike that they were not talking about crooked sticks ner no kind of sticks, ner they didn't give a dom what happened in Minnesota fifty year ago — if it ever had happened, which Murphy doubted. So Mike left his story in the middle and went off to the water jug under a stubby cedar, walking bowlegged and swinging his arms limply, palms turned backward, and muttering to himself as he went.

"A-ah, there goes a liar if ever there was one — him and his crooked sthick!" Murphy brought out a plug of tobacco the length of his hand and pried off a corner with his teeth. "Mebby it was a railroad tie, I dunno, that give him the dint in his head where he should have brains — but I misdoubt me if iver there was more than the prospect of a hole there, and niver a color to pay fer the diggin'." He looked at the professor and winked prodigiously, though Mike was out of earshot. "Him an' his crooked sthick!" he snorted, nudging the professor with his elbow. "'S fer me, I'd a dom sight ruther go be yer buke, young feller — and more I cannot say than thot."

The professor went back to his ledge on the hillside and began to peck away with his pick, getting a sample for Murphy to look at. He rather liked Murphy, who had addressed him as young feller — a term sweet to the ears of any man when he had passed forty-five and was still going. By George! an old miner like Murphy ought to know a fair prospect when he saw it! The professor hoped that he might really find gold on his claim. Gold would not lessen the timber value, and it would magnify the profits. They expected to make somewhere near six thousand dollars off each twenty acres; perhaps more, since they were noble trees and good, honest pine that brought the best price from the mills. Six thousand dollars was worth while, certainly; but think of the fortune if they could really find gold. He would have a more honest right to the claim, then. He wondered what Murphy thought of the shaft he was sinking over there, where Fred had perfunctorily broken through the leaf mold with a "prospect" hole, and had ordered Murphy and Mike to dig to bed-rock, and stop when they had the assessment work finished.

What Murphy thought of it Murphy was succinctly expressing just then to Mike, with an upward twinkle of his thick, convex glasses, and a contemptuous fling of his shovelful of dirt up over the rim of the hole.

"My gorry, I think this mine we're workin' on was located by the buke," he chuckled. "Fer if not that, will ye tell me why else they want 'er opened up? There's as much gold here as I've got in me pocket, an' not a dom bit more."

"Well, that man I knowed in Minnesota, he tuk a crooked sthick," gobbled Mike, whose speech, as well as his mind had been driven askew by the railroad tie; but Murphy impatiently shut him up again.

"A-ah, an' that's about as much as ye iver did know, I'm thinkin', le's have no more av yer crooked sthick. Hand me down that other pick, fer this wan is no sharper than me foot."

He worked steadily after that, flinging up the moist soil with an asperated "a-ah" that punctuated regularly each heave of his shoulder muscles. In a little he climbed out and helped Mike rig a windlass over the hole. Mike pottered a good deal, and stood often staring vacantly, studying the next detail of their work. When he was not using them, his hands drooped helplessly at his sides, a sign of mental slackness never to be mistaken. He was willing, and what Murphy told him to do he did. But it was Murphy who did the hard work, who planned for them both.

Presently Mike went bowlegging to camp to start their dinner, and Murphy finished spiking the windlass to the platform on which it rested. He still whispered a sibilant "a-ah!" with every blow of the hammer, and the perspiration trickled down his seamed temples in little rivulets to his chin that looked smaller and weaker than it should because he had lost so many of his teeth and had a habit of pinching his lower jaw up against his upper.

The professor came back with his sample of rock — with a pocketful of samples — just as Murphy had finished and was wiping his thick glasses on a soiled, blue calico handkerchief with large white polka-dots on the border and little white polka-dots in the middle. He turned toward the professor inquiringly, warned by the scrunching footsteps that some one approached. But he was blind as a bat — so he declared — without his glasses, so he finished polishing them and placed them again before his bleared, powder-burned eyes before he knew who was coming.

"An' it's you back already," he greeted, in his soft Irish voice, that tilted up at the end of every sentence, so that, without knowing what words he spoke, one would think he was asking question after question and never making a statement at all. "An' what have ye dug outy yer buke now?"

" No, by George, I dug this out of the ground," the professor declared, going forward eagerly. " I want you to tell me frankly just what you think of it."

" An' I will do that — though it's many the fight I've been in because of speakin' me mind," Murphy stated, grinning a little. " An' now le's see what ye got there. My gorry, I've been thinkin' they're all av thim buke mines that ye have here," he bantered, peering into the professor's face, before he took the largest piece of rock and turned it over critically in his hands. In a minute he handed it back with a quizzical glance.

" They's nawthin' there," he said softly. " If thot was gold-bearin' rock, my gorry, we'd all of us be rollin' in wealth, fer the mountains is made of such. Young feller, ye're wastin' yer time an' ivery dollar ye're sinkin' in these here claims ye've showed me — and thot's no lie I'm tellin' ye, but the truth, an' if ye believe it I'll soon be huntin' another job and ye'll be takin' the train back where ye come from."

The professor eyed him uncertainly. He looked at the great, singing pines that laced their branches together high over their heads. Fred, he thought, had made a mistake when he hired experienced miners to do this work. It might be better to let Murphy in. . . .

" Still the timber on the claims is worth proving up, and more," he ventured cautiously, with a sharp glance at Murphy's spectacles.

"A-ah, and there yer right," Murphy assented with the upward tilt to his voice. "An' if it's the timber ye be wantin', I'll say no more about the mine. Four thousand acres minin' claims no better than yer own have I seen held fer the trees on thim — an' ain't it the way some of these ole fellers thot goes around now wit' their two hands in their pants pockets an' no more work t' do wit' 'em than to light up their seegars — ain't it wit' the timber on their minin' claims that they made their pile? A-ah — but them was the good times fer them that had brains. A jackass like me an' Mike, here, we're the fellers thot went on a lookin' fer gold an' givin' no thought to the trees that stood above. An' thim that took the gold *an'* the trees, they're the ones thot's payin' wages now to the likes of Mike an' me."

He straightened his back and sent a speculative glance at the forest around him. "'Tis long sence the thrick has been worked through," he mused, turning his plug of tobacco over in his hand, looking for a likely place to sink his stained old teeth. "Ye'll be kapin' mum about what's in yer mind, young feller, ef ye don't want to bring the dom Forest Service on yer trail. Ef it was me, I'd buy me a bag of salt fer me mines — I would thot."

"Well, by George!" The professor stared. "What has salt —?"

"A-ah, an' there's where ye're ign'rant, young feller, wit' all yer buke l'arnin'. 'Tis gold I mean — gold thot ye can show t' thim thot gits cur'us. But if it was me, I'd sink me shaf' in a likelier spot than what this spot is — I wuddn't be bringing up durt like this, an' be callin' the hole a mine! I kin show ye places where ye kin git the color an' have the luke of a mine if ye haven't the gold. There's better men than you been fooled in these hills. I spint me a winter meself, cuttin' timbers fer me mine — an' no more than a mile from this spot it was — an' in the spring I sinks me shaf' an' not a dom ounce of gold do I git fer me pains!"

"Well, by George! I'll speak to Fred about it. I — I suppose you can be trusted, Murphy?"

Murphy spat far from him and hitched up his sagging overalls. "Kin any man be trusted?" he inquired sardonically. "He kin, says I, if it's to his intrust. I'm gittin' my wages fer the diggin', ain't I? Then it's to me intrust to kape on diggin'! Sure, me tongue niver wagged me belly outy a grub-stake yit, young feller! I'm with ye on this, an' thot's me true word I'm givin' ye."

The professor hurried off to find Fred and urge him to let Murphy advise them upon the exact sites of their mines. Murphy hung his hammer up in the forked branches of a young oak, and went off to his dinner. Arriving there, he straightway discovered that Mike, besides frying bacon and making a pot of muddy coffee and stirring up a bannock, had been engaged also in what passed with him for thinking.

"Them fellers don't know nothin' about minin'," he began when he had poured himself a cup of coffee and turned the pot with the handle toward Murphy. "They's no gold there, where we're diggin', I know there's no gold! They's no sign of gold. They can dig a hunnerd feet down, an' they won't find no gold! Why, in Minnesota, that time—"

"A-ah, now, le's have none av Minnesota," Murphy broke in upon Mike's gobbling — no other word expresses Mike's manner of speech, or comes anywhere near to giving any idea of his mushy mouthing of words. "An' who iver said they was after gold, now?"

Mike's jaw went slack while he stared dully at his partner. "An' if they ain't after gold, what they diggin' fer, then?" he demanded, when he had collected what he could of his scattered thoughts.

"A-ah, now, an' thot's a diffrunt story, Mike, me boy." Murphy broke off a piece of bannock, on the side least burned, and nodded his head in a peculiarly knowing manner. "Av ye could kape yer tongue quiet fr'm clappin' all ye know, Mike, I cud tell ye somethin' — I cud thot."

"Wh-why, nobudy ever heard *me* talkin' things that's tol' in secret," Mike made haste to asseverate. "Why, one time in Minnesota, they was a feller, he tol' *me,* min' yuh, things 't he wouldn't tell his own mthrrr!" Mike, poor man, could not say mother at all. He just buzzed with his tongue and let it go at that. But Murphy was used to his peculiarities and guessed what he meant.

"An' there's where he showed respick fer the auld lady," he commended drily, and winked at his cup of coffee.

"An' he tol' *me,* mind yuh, all about a mrrer" (which was as close as he could come to murder) "an' he *knew,* mind ye, who it was, an' he tol' *me* — an' why, *I* wouldn't ever say nothin' an' he knew it — I doctrrrred his eyes, mind ye, mind ye, an' the doctrrrs they couldn't do nothin' — an' we was with this outfit that was puttin' in a bridge" (only he couldn't say bridge to save his life) "this was 'way back in Minnesota —"

"A-ah, now ye come back to Minnesota, ye better quit yer travelin' an' eat yer dinner," quelled Murphy impatiently. "An' le's hear no more 'bout it."

Mike laid a strip of scorched bacon upon a chunk of scorched bannock and bit down through the mass, chewed meditatively and stared into the coals of his camp fire. "If they ain't diggin' fer gold, then what are they *diggin'* fer?" he demanded aggressively, and so suddenly that Murphy started.

"A-ah, now, I'll tell ye what they're diggin' fer, but it's a secret, mind ye, and ye must nivver spheak a word av it. They're diggin' fer anguintum, me boy. An' thot's wort' more than gold, an' the likes av me 'n you wadden't know if we was to wade through it, but it's used in the war, I dunno, t' make gas-bags t' kill the inimy, and ye're t' say nawthin' t' nobody er they'll likely take an' hang ye fer a spy on the government, but ye're sa-afe, Mike, s' long as ye sthick t' me an' yer job an' say nawthin' t' nobody, d' ye see."

"They'd nivver hang *me* fer a spy," Mike gobbled excitedly. "They'll nivver hang *me* — why I knowed —"

"A-ah, av yer ivver did ye've fergot it intirely," Murphy squelched him pitilessly.

Mike gulped down a mouthful and took a swallow of muddy coffee. "They better look out how they come around *me*," he threatened vaguely. "They can't take me for a spy. I'd git the lawyers after 'em, an' I'd make 'em trouble. They wanta look out — I'd spend ivvery cent I make on lawyers an' courts if they took and hung me fer a spy. I'd *lawsue* 'em!"

Murphy laughed. "A-ah, would ye, now!" he cried admiringly. "My gorry, it takes a brain like yours t' think av things. Now, av they hung me, I'd be likes to let 'er sthand thot way. I'd nivver a thought t' lawsue 'em fer it — I wad not!"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

A CAVE DWELLER JACK WOULD BE

SMOKE-TINGED sunlight and warm winds and languorous days held for another full month in the mountains. Then the pines complained all through one night, and in the morning they roared like the rush of breakers in a storm, and sent dead branches crashing down, and sifted brown needles thick upon the earth below.

"A-ah, but she's goin' t' give us the rain now, I dunno," Murphy predicted, staring up at the leaden clouds through his thick glasses. "Ye better git up some firewood, Mike, and make the camp snug agin foul weather. An' av' the both of ye ain't got yer place tight an' ready fer a sthorm, ye betther be stirrin' yerselves an' let the diggin' go fer a day. It's firewood ye'll need, an' in a dry place. An' while ye're talkin' 'bout wood, have yer got yer wood fer the winter? An' yer goin' to sthay, ye bin tellin' me."

Fred looked around him at the forest where the oaks and the cottonwoods and all the trailing vines were fluttering gay red and yellow leaves in the wind. Fall was slipping on him unaware. He had thought that there was plenty of time to make ready for winter, but now he knew that the time was short — too short, maybe, with that wind booming up from the southwest.

"You and Mike can knock off work here, and when your camp's in shape you can come over and cut wood for us. Doug, we'll beat it and throw that woodshed together we've been going to build. Think it'll storm today, Murphy?"

Murphy stepped out where he could glimpse the southern sky, and eyed the drift of heavy clouds. "She will not bust loose t'day, I'm thinkin'," he decided. "She'll be workin' 'erself up to the pint av shnowin' er rainin' er both. Rain in the valley, shnow up here where we're at, I'm thinkin'. She'll be a rip when she does bust loose, me boy, an' ye can't have things too tight an' shnug."

"I believe yuh. Come on, Doug. Murphy, you can take care of the tools and cover up the hole, will you?"

"I will do that." Murphy grinned after the two tolerantly. "Will I take care av me tools, an' it buildin' a sthorm?" he sarcastically asked the swaying bushes around him. "An' do I need a pilgrim to remind me av that? An' thim wit' no wood, I dunno, whin they shud have thurrty tier at the very least, sawed an' sphlit an' ricked up under cover where it can be got at whin they want it — an' they will want it, fair enough! A-ah, but they'll find they ain't winterin' in Southern Californy, before they're t'rough with this country. They're not got their winter grub laid in, an' I'll bet money on't, an' no wood, an' they're like t' be shnowed in here, whin no rig will come up thot grade wit' a load an' I don't care how much they'll pay t' have it hauled, an' them two not able t' pack grub on their backs as I've done manny's the time, an' them wimmin wantin' all the nicks Lee's got in his sthores! Cake an' pie, it's likely they must have in the house er they think they're not eatin'." Murphy talked as he worked, putting the tools in a pile ready to be carried to camp, picking up pieces of rope and wire and boards and nails, and laying a plank roof over the windlass and weighting it with rocks. Mike had gone pacing to camp, swinging his arms and talking to himself also, though his talk was less humanly kind under the monotonous grumble. Mike was gobbling under his breath, something about law-suing anybody that come botherin' him an' tryin' t' arrest him for nothin'. But Murphy continued to harp upon the subject of domestic preparedness.

" An' that leanto them men sleep in is no better than nothin' an' if it kapes the rain off their blankets it'll not kape off the shnow, an' it won't kape off the wind at all. An' they've not got the beddin' they'll be needin', an' I'll bet money on it.

"They should have a cellar dug back av the cabin where's the hill the sun gets to, an' they should have it filled with spuds an' cabbages an' the like — but what have they got? A dollar's worth av sugar, maybe, an' a fifty-poun' sack av flour, an' maybe a roll av butter an' a table full of nicknacks which they could do without — an' winter comin' on like the lope av a coyote after a rabbit, an' them no better prepared than the rabbit, ner so, fer the rabbit's maybe got a hole he can duck inty an' they have nawthin' but the summer camp they've made, an' *hammicks,* by gorry, whin they should have warrm overshoes an' sourdough coats! Tenderfeet an' pilgrims they be, an' these mountains is no place fer such with winter comin' on — an' like to be a bad wan the way the squrls has been layin' away nuts."

Pilgrims and tenderfeet they were, and their lack of foresight might well shock an oldtimer like Murphy. But he would have been still more shocked had he seen what poor amateurish preparations for the coming winter another young tenderfoot had been making. If he had seen the place which Jack Corey had chosen for his winter hide-out I think he would have taken a fit; and if he had seen the little pile of food which Jack referred to pridefully as his grubstake I don't know what he would have done.

Under the barren, rock-upended peak of King Solomon there was a narrow cleft between two huge slabs that had slipped off the ledge when the mountain was in the making. At the farther end of the cleft there was a cave the size of a country school-house, with a jagged opening in the roof at one side, and with a "back-door" opening that let one out into a network of clefts and caves. It was cool and quiet in there when Jack discovered the hiding place, and the wind blowing directly from the south that day, did not more than whistle pleasantly through a big fissure somewhere in the roof.

Jack thought it must have been made to order, and hastened down to their meeting place and told Marion so. And the very next day she insisted upon meeting him on the ridge beyond Toll-Gate basin and climbing with him to the cave. As soon as she had breath enough to talk, she agreed with him as emphatically as her vocabulary and her flexible voice would permit. Made to order? She should say it was! Why, it was perfect, and she was just as jealous of him as she could be. Why, look at the view! And the campfire smoke wouldn't show but would drift away through all those caves; or if it did show, people would simply think that a new volcano had bursted loose, and they would be afraid to climb the peak for fear of getting caught in an eruption. Even if they did come up, Jack could see them hours before they got there, and he could hide. And anyway, they never would find his cave. It was perfect, just like a moonshiner story or something.

Speaking of smoke reminded Jack that he would have to lay in a supply of wood, which was some distance below the rock crest. Manzanita was the closest, and that was brushy stuff. He also told Marion gravely that he must do it before any snow came, or his tracks would be a dead give-away to the place. He must get all his grubstake in too, and after snowfall he would have to be mighty careful about making tracks around any place.

Marion thought that snow on the mountain would be "keen," and suggested that Jack try a pair of her shoes, and see if he couldn't manage to wear them whenever there was snow. His feet were very small for a man's, and hers were — well, not tiny for a woman, and she would spend so much time hiking around over the hills that a person would think, of course, she had made the tracks. Being an impulsive young woman who believed in doing things on the spot, she thereupon retired behind a corner of rock, and presently threw one of her high-lace boots out to Jack. It crumpled his toes, but Jack thought he could wear it if he had to. So that point was settled satisfactorily, and they went on planning impossibilities with a naïve enthusiasm that would have horrified Murphy.

Any man could have told Jack things to dampen his enthusiasm for wintering on the top of King Solomon. But Jack, for perfectly obvious reasons, was not asking any man for information or advice upon that subject. Hank Brown would have rambled along the trail of many words and eventually have told Jack some things that he ought to know — only Hank Brown came no more to Mount Hough lookout station. A stranger brought Jack's weekly pack-load of supplies; a laconic type of man who held his mind and his tongue strictly to the business at hand. The other men who came there were tourists, and with them Jack would not talk at all if he could help it.

So he went blandly on with his camp building, four precious days out of every month. He chopped dead manzanita bush and carried it on his back to his hide-out, and was tickled with the pile he managed to store away in one end of the cave. Working in warm weather, it seemed to be a great deal of wood.

From the lookout station he watched the slow building of the storm that so worried Murphy because of the Toll-Gate people. He watched the circled sweep of the clouds rushing from mountain ridge to mountain ridge. Straight off Claremont they came, and tangled themselves in the treetops of the higher slopes. The wind howled over the mountain so fiercely that he could scarcely force his way against it to the spring for water. And when he filled his bucket the wind sloshed half of it out before he could reach the puny shelter of his station. If he had ever wondered why that station was banked solid to the window-sills with rocks, he wondered no more when he felt that gale pushing and tugging at it and shrieking as if it were enraged because it could not pick the station up bodily and fling it down into the lake below.

"Gee! I'm glad I've got a cave the wind can't monkey with, to winter in," he congratulated himself fatuously once, when the little boxlike building shook in the blast.

That night the wind slept, and the mountain lay hushed after the tumult. But the clouds hung heavy and gray at dark, and in the morning they had not drifted on. It was as though the mountain tops had corralled all the clouds in the country and held them penned like sheep over the valleys. With the gray sunrise came the wind again, and howled and trumpeted and bullied the harassed forests until dark. And then, with dark came the stinging slap of rain upon the windows, and pressed Jack's loneliness deep into the soul of him.

"They'll be shutting up this joint for the winter," he told himself many times that night, half hopefully, half regretfully. "They won't pay a man to watch forests that are soaking wet. I guess my job's done here."

The next morning a thin white blanket of snow fresh sifted from the clouds lay all over the summit and far down the sides. Beyond its edges the rain beat steadily upon the matted leaves and branches. Surely his job was ended with that storm, Jack kept telling himself, while he stared out at his drenched world capped with white. It was the nearest he had ever been to snow, except once or twice when he had gone frolicking up Mount Wilson with snowballing parties. He scooped up handfuls of it with a dreary kind of gleefulness — dreary because he must be gleeful alone — he made tracks all around just for the novelty of it; he snowballed the rocks. He would soon go into a different kind of exile, without rules and regulations to hamper his movements; without seventy-five dollars a month salary, too, by the way! But he would have the freedom of the mountains. He would be snug and safe in his cave over there, and Marion would climb up to meet him every day or so and bring him magazines and news of the outside world. And he would fill in the time hunting, and maybe do a little prospecting, as he had vaguely hinted to the man who brought his supplies. It would not be so bad.

But his job did not end with that storm. The storm passed after a few days of dreary drizzle in the lower country and howling winds over the crest and a few hours of daytime snowfall that interested Jack hugely because he had never in his life before seen snow actually falling out of the sky. Then the sun came out and dried the forests, and Supervisor Ross said nothing whatever about closing the lookout station for the winter.

A week of beautiful weather brought other beautiful weeks. He had another four days' relief and, warned by the storm, he spent the time in laboriously carrying dead pine wood and spruce bark up to his cave. It wouldn't do any harm to have a lot of wood stored away. It might get pretty cold, some stormy days. Already the nights were pretty nippy, even to a warm blooded young fellow who had never in his life really suffered from cold. Some instinct of self-preservation impelled him to phone in for a canvas bed sheet — a "tarp," he had heard Hank Brown call it — and two pairs of the heaviest blankets to be had in Quincy. You bet a fellow ought to be prepared for the worst when he is planning to winter in a cave! Especially when he must do his preparing now, or tough it out till spring.

With his mirror he heliographed a signal to Marion, and when she came he said he must have more cigarettes, because he might smoke harder when he was really settled down to roughing it. What he should have ordered was more bacon and flour, but he did not know that, his mind dwelling upon the luxuries of life rather than the necessities — he who had never met real necessity face to face.

"I'll send the order right away," Marion obligingly promised him. "But Kate will be simply furious if she sees the package. The last lot I made her believe was candy that was sent me, and because I didn't offer her any of it — I couldn't, of course — she would hardly talk for a whole day, and she hinted about selfishness. She thinks I carry my pockets full of candy when I start off hiking through the woods, and eat it all by myself." She laughed because it seemed a good joke on Kate.

The next time she climbed up to the station she found him boarding up the windows and hanging certain things from the ceiling to keep them away from rats, under the telephone directions of the supervisor. He expected Hank's successor up that afternoon to move down what must be taken to town for the winter. He did not seem so cheerful over the near prospect of hiding out on King Solomon, and Marion herself seemed depressed a bit and more silent than usual. The wind whistled keenly over the peak, whipping her khaki skirt around her ankles and searching out the open places in her sweater. Claremont and the piled ridges beyond were hooded in clouds that seemed heavy with moisture, quite unlike the woolly fleeces of fair weather.

"Well, she's all nailed down for the winter," Jack said apathetically when the last board was in place. "She's been a queer old summer, but I kind of hate to leave the old peak, at that."

They turned their heads involuntarily and stared across the fire-scarred mountainside to where Taylor Rock thrust bleakly up into the sky. A summer unmarked by incidents worthy the name of events, spent on one mountain top; a winter that promised as little diversion upon another mountain top —

"Say, a ride on a real live street car would look as big to me right now as a three-ring circus," Jack summed up his world-hunger with a shrug. "By the time I've wintered over there I'll be running round in circles trying to catch my shadow. Plumb bugs, that's what I'll be; and don't I know it!"

"You'll love it," Marion predicted with elaborate cheerfulness. "I only wish I could change places with you. Think of me, shut up in a dark little three-room cabin with one elocutionist, one chronic grouch and one human bluebottle fly that does nothing but buzz! You're a lucky kid to have a whole mountain all to yourself. Think of me!"

"Oh, I'll think of you, all right!" Jack returned glumly and turned back to the denuded little station. "I'll think of you," he repeated under his breath, feeling savagely for the top button of his thick gray sweater. "Don't I know it!"

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

MIKE GOES SPYING ON THE SPIES

MIKE sat hunched forward on a box in front of the stove in the rough little cabin where he and Murphy were facing together the winter in Toll-Gate flat. For an hour he had stared at the broken cook stove where a crack disclosed the blaze within. He chewed steadily and abstractedly upon a lump of tar-weed, and now and then he unclasped his hands and gave his left forefinger a jerk that made the knuckle crack. Tar-weed and knuckle-cracking were two queer little habits much affected by Mike. The weed he chewed in the belief that it not only kept his physical body in perfect health, but purified his soul as well; cracking the knuckles on his left forefinger cleared the muddle of his mind when he wanted to go deep into a subject that baffled him.

Hunched forward on another box sat Murphy nursing his elbow with one grimy palm and his pipe with the other. He would glance at Mike now and then and with a sour grin lifting the scraggly ends of his grizzled mustache. Murphy was resentfully contemptuous of Mike's long silences, but he was even more contemptuous of Mike's gobbling indistinct speech, so he let Mike alone and comforted himself with grinning superciliously when Mike was silent, and sneering at him openly when he spoke, and cursing his cooking when Mike cooked.

"That gurrl," Mike blurted abruptly while he cracked his knuckles, "she'd better look out!"

"A-ah," retorted Murphy scornfully, "belike ye'd better tell her so thin. Or belike ye better set yerself t' look out fer the gurrl — I dunno."

"Oh, I'll look out fer her," Mike gobbled, nodding his head mysteriously. "I bin lookin' out fer her all the time — but she ain't as cute as what she thinks she is. Oh, maybe she's cute, but there's them that's cuter, an' they don't live over in Europe, neither. Don't you worry —"

"Which I'm not doin' at all, me fine duck," vouchsafed Murphy boredly, crowding down the tobacco in his pipe. "An' it's you that's doin' the worryin', and fer why I dunno."

"Oh, I ain't worryin'— but that gurrl, she better look out, an' the old un she better look out too."

"An' fer what, then, Mike, should the gurrl be lookin' out? Fer a husband, maybe yer thinkin'."

Mike nodded his head in a way that did not mean assent, but merely that he was not telling all his thoughts. He fell silent, staring again at the glowing crack in the stove. Twice he snapped his knuckles before he spoke again.

"She thinks," he began again abruptly, "that everybody's blind. But that's where she makes a big mistake. They's nothin' the matter with *my* eyes. An' that old un, she better look out too. Why, the gurrl, she goes spyin' around t' meet the other spy, an' the old un she goes spyin' around after the gurrl, an' me I'm spyin' on — *all* of 'em!" He waved a dirt grimed, calloused hand awkwardly. "The whole bunch," he chortled. "They can't fool *me* with their spyin' around! An' the gov'ment can't fool me nayther. I know who's the spies up here, an' I kin fool 'em all. Why, it's like back in Minnesota one time —"

Murphy, having listened attentively thus far, settled back against the wall, swung a rough-shod foot and began nursing his pipe and elbow again. "A-ah, an' it's the trail to Minnesota, then," he commented disgustedly, nodding his head derisively. "Umm-hmm — it's back in Minnesota ye're wanderin' befuddled with yer sphies. So l'ave Minnesota wance more, Mike, an' put some beans a-soakin' like I explained t' ye forty-wan times a're'dy. My gorry, they're like bullets the way ye bile them fer an hour and ask that I eat thim. An' since yer eyes is so foine and keen, Mike, that ye can see sphies thick as rabbits in the woods, wud ye just pick out a few of the rocks, Mike, that will not come soft with all the b'ilin' ye can give thim? For if I come down wance more with me teeth on a rock, it's likely I might lose me temper, I dunno."

Mike grumbled and got out the beans, and Murphy went back to his smoking and his meditations. He made so little of Mike's outburst about the spies that he did not trouble to connect it with any one in the basin. Mike was always talking what Murphy called fool gibberish, that no man of sense would listen to it if he could help it. So Murphy fell to calculating how much of the money he had earned might justly be spent upon a few days' spree without endangering the grubstake he planned to take into the farther mountains in the spring. Murphy had been sober now for a couple of months, and he was beginning to thirst for the liquid joys of Quincy. Presently he nodded his head slowly, having come to a definite conclusion in his argument with himself.

"I think I'll be goin' t' town in the marnin', Mike, av I kin git a little money from the boss," he said, lookin' up. "It's comin' cold, an' more shnow, I'm thinkin', an' I must have shoepacs, I dunno. So we'll be up early in the marnin', an' it's a hefty two-hours walk t' town fer anny man — more now with the shnow. An' I be thinkin'—"

What he was thinking he did not say, and Mike did not ask. He seemed not to hear Murphy's declaration at all. Now that he had the beans soaking, Mike was absorbed in his own thoughts again. He did not care what Murphy did. Murphy, in Mike's estimation, was merely a conceited old fellow-countryman with bad eyes and a sharp tongue. Let Murphy go to town if he liked. Mike had plans of his own.

The old un, for instance, stirred Mike's curiosity a good deal. Why should she be following the girl, when the girl went tramping around in the woods? They lived in the same cabin, and it seemed to Mike that she must know all about what the girl was doing and why she was doing it. And why didn't the men go tramping around like that, since they were all in together? Mike decided that the two women must be spies, and the men didn't know anything about it. Probably they were spying on the men, to get them in trouble with the government — which to Mike was a vast, formless power only a little less than the Almighty. It might be that the women were spies for some other government, and meant to have the men hanged when the time was ripe for it; in other words, when these queer mines with no gold in them were all done.

But a spy spying on a spy smacked of complications too deep for Mike, with all his knuckle-cracking. He was lost in a maze of conflicting conjectures whenever he tried to figure the thing out. And who was the other spy that stayed up on Taylor Rock? There was smoke up there where should be no smoke. Mike had seen it. There were little flashes of light up there on sunny days — Mike had seen them also. And there was nothing in the nature of Taylor Rock itself to produce either smoke or flashes of light. No one but a spy would stay in so bleak a place. That was clear enough to Mike by this time; what he must find out was why one spy followed another spy.

The very next day Marion left the cabin and set forth with a square package under her arm. Mike, watching from where he was at work getting out timbers for next year's assessment work on the claims, waited until she had passed him at a short distance, going down the trail toward Quincy. When she had reached the line of timber that stood thick upon the slope opposite the basin, he saw Kate, bulky in sweater and coat, come from the cabin and take the trail after Marion. When she also had disappeared in the first wooded curve of the trail, up the hill, Mike struck his axe bit-deep into the green log he was clearing of branches, and shambled after her, going by a short cut that brought him into the trail within calling distance of Kate.

For half a mile the road climbed through deep forest. Marion walked steadily along, taking no pains to hide her tracks in the snow that lay there white as the day on which it had fallen. Bluejays screamed at her as she passed, but there was no other sound. Even the uneasy wind was quiet that day, and the faint scrunching of Marion's feet in the frozen snow when she doubled back on a curve in the trail, came to Kate's ears quite plainly.

At the top of the hill where the wind had lifted the snow into drifts that left bare ground between, Marion stopped and listened, her head turned so that she could watch the winding trail behind her. She thought she heard the scrunch of Kate's feet down there, but she was not sure. She looked at the scrubby manzanita bushes at her right, chose her route and stepped widely to one side, where a bare spot showed between two bushes. Her left foot scraped the snow in making the awkward step, but she counted on Kate being unobserving enough to pass it over. She ducked behind a chunky young cedar, waited there for a breath or two and then ran down the steep hillside, keeping always on the bare ground as much as possible. Lower down, where the sun was shut away and the wind was sent whistling overhead to the next hilltop, the snow lay knee deep and even. But Kate would never come this far off the trail, Marion was sure. She believed that Kate suspected her of walking down to the valley, perhaps even to town, though the distance was too great for a casual hike of three hours or so. But there was the depot, not quite at the foot of the mountain; and at the station was the agent's wife, who was a friendly little person. Marion had made it a point to mention the agent's wife in an intimate, personal way, as though she were in the habit of visiting there. Mrs. Morton had an awful time getting her clothes dry without having them all smudged up with engine smoke, she had said after her last trip. Then she had stopped abruptly as though the remark had slipped out unaware. It was easy enough to fool poor Kate.

But there was a chance that poor Kate would walk clear down to the station, and find no Marion. In that case, Marion decided to invent a visit to one of the nearest ranches. That would be easy enough, for if Marion did not know any of the ranchers, neither did Kate, and she would scarcely go so far as to inquire at all the ranches. That would be too ridiculous; besides, Kate was not likely to punish herself by making the trip just for the sake of satisfying her curiosity.

Marion plunged on down the hill, hurrying because she was later than she had intended to be, and it was cold for a person standing around in the snow. She crossed the deep gulch and climbed laboriously up the other side, over hidden shale rock and through clumps of bushes that snatched at her clothing like a witch's bony fingers. She had no more than reached the top when Jack stepped out from behind a pine tree as wide of girth as a hogshead. Marion gave a little scream, and then laughed. After that she frowned at him.

"Say, you mustn't come down so far!" she expostulated. "You know it isn't a bit safe — I've told you so a dozen times, and every time I come out, here I find you a mile or so nearer to camp. Why, yesterday there were two men up here hunting. I saw them, and so did Doug. They gave Doug the liver of the deer they killed and the heart — so he wouldn't tell on them, I suppose. What if they had seen you?"

"One of them was Hank Brown," Jack informed her unemotionally. "I met him close as I am to you, and he swung off and went the other way. Last time we met I licked the daylights out of him, and I guess he hasn't forgotten the feel of my knuckles. Anyway, he stampeded."

"Well, forevermore!" Marion was indignant. "What's the use of your hiding out in a cave, for goodness' sake, if you're going to let people see you whenever they come up this way? Just for that I've a good mind not to give you these cigarettes. I could almost smoke them myself, anyway. Kate thinks that I do. She found out that it wasn't candy, the last time, so I had to pretend I have a secret craving for cigarettes, and I smoked one right before her to prove it. We had quite a fuss over it, and I told her I'd smoke them in the woods to save her feelings, but that I just simply must have them. She thinks now that the Martha Washington is an awful place; that's where she thinks I learned. She cried about it, and that made me feel like a criminal, only I was so sick I didn't care at the time. Take them — and please don't smoke so much, Jack! It's simply awful, the amount you use."

"All right. I'll cut out the smoking and go plumb crazy." To prove his absolute sincerity, he tore open the package, extracted a cigarette and began to smoke it with a gloomy relish. "Didn't bring anything to read, I suppose?" he queried after a minute which Marion spent in getting her breath and in gazing drearily out over the wintry mountainside.

"No, Kate was watching me, and I couldn't. I pretended at first that I was lending magazines and papers to Murphy and Mike, but she has found out that Murphy's eyes are too bad, and Mike, the ignorant old lunatic, can't read or write. I haven't squared that with her yet. I've been thinking that I'd invent a ranch or something to visit. Murphy says there's one on Taylor Creek, but the people have gone down below for the winter; and it's close enough so Kate could walk over and find out for herself."

She began to pull bits of bark off the tree trunk and throw them aimlessly at a snow-mounded rock. "It's fierce, living in a little pen of a place like that, where you can't make a move without somebody wanting to know why," she burst out savagely. "I can't write a letter or read a book or put an extra pin in my hat, but Kate knows all about it. She thinks I'm an awful liar. And I'm beginning to actually hate her. And she was the very best friend I had in the world when we came up here. Five thousand dollars' worth of timber can't pay for what we're going through, down there!"

"You cut it out," said Jack, reaching for another cigarette. "My part of it, I mean. It's that that's raising the deuce with you two, so you just cut me out of it. I'll make out all right." As an afterthought he added indifferently, "I killed a bear the other day. I was going to bring you down a chunk. It isn't half bad; change from deer meat and rabbits and grouse, anyway."

Marion shook her head. "There it is again. I couldn't take it home without lying about where I got it. And Kate would catch me up on it — she takes a perfectly fiendish delight in cornering me in a lie, lately." She brightened a little. "I'll tell you, Jack. We'll go up to the cave and cook some there. Kate can't," she told him grimly, "tell what I've been eating, thank goodness, once it's swallowed!"

"It's too hard hiking up there through the snow," Jack hastily objected. "Better not tackle it. Tell you what I can do though. I'll whittle off a couple of steaks and bring them down tomorrow, and we'll hunt a safe place to cook them. Have a barbecue," he grinned somberly.

"Oh, all right — if I can give Kate the slip. Did you skin him?" reverting with some animation to the slaying of the bear. "It must have been keen."

"It was keen — till I got the hide off the bear and onto my bed."

"You don't sound as if it was a bit thrilling." She looked at him dubiously. "How did it happen? You act as if you had killed a chipmunk, and I want to be excited! Did the bear come at you?"

"Nothing like that. I came at the bear. I just hunted around till I found a bear that had gone byelow, and I killed him and borrowed his hide. It was a mean trick on him — but I was cold."

"Oh, with all those blankets?"

Jack grinned with a sour kind of amusement at her tone, but his reply was an oblique answer to her question.

"Remember that nice air-hole in the top where the wind whistled in and made a kind of tune? You ought to spend a night up there now listening to it."

Marion threw a piece of bark spitefully at a stump beyond the snow mound. "But you have a fire," she said argumentatively. "And you have all kinds of reading, and plenty to eat."

"Am I kicking?"

"Well, you sound as if you'd like to. You simply don't know how lucky you are. You ought to be shut up in that little cabin with Kate and the professor."

"Lead me to 'em," Jack suggested with suspicious cheerfulness.

"Don't be silly. Are there lots of bears up there, Jack?"

"Maybe, but I haven't happened to see any, except two or three that ran into the brush soon as they got a whiff of me. And this one I hunted out of a hole under a big tree root. It's a lie about them wintering in caves. They'd freeze to death."

"You — you aren't really uncomfortable, are you, Jack?"

"Oh, no." Jack gave the "no" what Kate would have called a sliding inflection deeply surcharged with irony.

"Well, but why don't you keep the fire going? The smoke doesn't show at all, scarcely. And if you're going to tramp all over the mountains and let everybody see you, it doesn't matter a bit."

Jack lit his third cigarette. "What's going on in the world, anyway? Any news from — down South?"

"Well, the papers don't say much. There's been an awful storm that simply ruined the beaches, they say. Fred has gone down — something about your case, I think. And then he wanted to see the men who are in on this timber scheme. They aren't coming through with the assessment money the way they promised, and Fred and Doug and Kate had to dig up more than their share to pay for the work. I didn't because I didn't have anything to give — and Kate has been hinting things about that, too."

"I wish you'd take —"

"Now, don't you dare finish that sentence! When I came up here with them they agreed to do my assessment work and take it out of the money we get when we sell, and they're to get interest on all of it. Kate proposed it herself, because she wanted me up here with her. Let them keep the agreement. Fred isn't complaining — Fred's just dandy about everything. It's only —"

"Well, I guess I'll be getting back. It's a tough climb up to my hangout." Jack's interest in the conversation waned abruptly with the mention of Fred. "Can't you signal about ten o'clock tomorrow, if you're coming out? Then I'll bring down some bear meat."

"Oh, and I'll bring some cake and bread, if I can dodge Kate. I'll put up a lunch as if it were for me. Kate had good luck with her bread this time. I'll bring all I dare. And, Jack,— you aren't really uncomfortable up there, are you? Of course, I know it gets pretty cold, and maybe it's lonesome sometimes at night, but — you stayed alone all summer, so —"

"Oh, I'm all right. Don't you worry a minute about me. Run along home now, before you make Kate sore at you again. And don't forget to let me know if you're coming. I'll meet you right about here. So long, pardner." He stuffed the package of cigarettes into his coat pocket and plunged into the balsam thicket behind him as though he was eager to get away from her presence.

Marion felt it, and looked after him with hurt questioning in her eyes. "He's got his cigarettes — that's all he cares about," she told herself resentfully. "Well, if he thinks *I* care —!"

She went slipping and stumbling down the steep wall of the gulch, crossed it and climbed the other side and came upon Kate, sitting in the snow and holding her right ankle in both hands and moaning pitiably.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

PENITENCE, REAL AND UNREAL

KATE rocked back and forth, and tears of pain rolled down her cheeks. She leaned her shoulder against a tree and moaned, with her eyes shut. It frightened Marion to look at her. She went up and put her hand on Kate's shoulder with more real tenderness than she had felt for months.

"What's the matter, Kate? Did you hurt yourself? Is it your ankle?" she asked insipidly.

"O-oh! Marion, you keep me nearly distracted! You must know I only want to guard you against — oh — gossip and trouble. You seem to look upon me as an enemy, lately — Oh! — And I only want to consider your best interests. Who is that man, Marion? I believe he is a criminal, and I'm going to send word to the sheriff. If he isn't, he is welcome at the cabin — you know it, Marion. You — you hurt me so, when you meet him out here in this sly way — just as if you couldn't trust me. And I have always been your friend." She stopped and began moaning again.

"Now, don't cry, dear! You're simply upset and nervous. Let me help you up, Kate. Is it your ankle?"

"Oh, it pains dreadfully — but the shock of seeing you meet that strange man out here and knowing that you will not trust me —"

"Why, forevermore! I do trust you, Kate. But you have been so different — you don't trust *me,* is the trouble. I'm not doing anything awful, only you won't see anything but the wrong side of everything I do. I'd tell you about the man, only —" Marion glanced guiltily across at the place where Jack had disappeared, "— it's his secret, and I can't."

Kate wept in that subdued, heartbroken way which is so demoralizing to the person who has caused the tears. Like a hurt child she rubbed her ankle and huddled there in the snow.

"We never used to have secrets," she mourned dismally. "This place has changed you so — oh, I am simply too miserable to care for anything any more. Go on, Marion — I'll get home somehow. I shouldn't have followed, but I was so hurt at your coldness and your lack of confidence! And I was sure you were deceiving me. I simply could not endure the suspense another day. You — you don't know what I have suffered! Go on — you'll get cold standing here. I'll come — after awhile. But I'd as soon be dead as go on in this way. Please go on!"

Kate may have been a bit hysterical; at any rate, she really believed herself utterly indifferent to her sprained ankle and the chance of freezing. She closed her eyes again and waved Marion away, and Marion immediately held her closer and patted her shoulder and kissed her remorsefully.

"Now, don't cry, dear — you'll have me crying in a minute. Be a good sport and see if you can't walk a little. I'll help you. And once you're back by the fire, and have your ankle all comfy, and a cup of hot chocolate, you'll feel heaps better. Hang tight to me, dear, and I'll help you up."

It was a long walk for a freshly sprained ankle, and the whiteness of Kate's face stamped deeper into Marion's conscience the guilty sense of being to blame for it all. She had started in by teasing Kate over little things, just because Kate was so inquisitive and so lacking in any sense of humor. She could see now that she had antagonized Kate where she should have humored her little whims. It wouldn't have done any harm, Marion reflected penitently, to have confided more in Kate. She used to tell her everything, and Kate had always been so loyal and sympathetic.

Penitence of that sort may go to dangerous lengths of confession if it is not stopped in time. Nothing checked Marion's excited conscience. The ankle which she bared and bathed was so swollen and purple that any lurking suspicion of the reality of the hurt vanished, and Marion cried over it with sheer pity for the torture of that long walk. Kate's subdued sadness did the rest.

So with Kate, lying on the couch near the fire and with two steaming cups of chocolate between them on an up-ended box that sturdily did its duty as a table, Marion let go of her loyalty to one that she might make amends to another. She told Kate everything she knew about Jack Corey, down to the exact number of times she had bought cigarettes and purloined magazines and papers for him. Wherefore the next hour drew them closer to their old intimacy than they had been since first they came into the mountains; so close an intimacy that they called each other dearie while they argued the ethics of Jack's case and the wisdom — or foolishness — of Marion's championship of the scapegoat.

"You really should have confided in me long ago — at the very first inkling you had of his identity," Kate reiterated, sipping her chocolate as daintily as ever she had sipped at a reception. "I can scarcely forgive that, dearie. You were taking a tremendous risk of being maligned and misunderstood. You might have found yourself terribly involved. You are *so* impulsive, Marion. You should have come straight to me."

"Well, but I was afraid —"

"Afraid of Kate? Why, *dearie!*"

That is the way they talked, until they heard the professor scraping the snow off his feet on the edge of the flat doorstep. Kate lay back then on her piled pillows, placed a finger across her closed lips and pulled her scanty hair braid down over her left shoulder. She shut her eyes and held them so until the professor came in, when she opened them languidly.

Marion carried away the chocolate cups, her heart light. She would not have believed that a reconciliation with Kate and the unburdening of her secret could work such a change in her feelings. She wished fervently that she had told Kate at first. Now they could have Jack down at the cabin sometimes, when the men were both away. They would cook nice little dinners for him, and she could lend him all the reading matter he wanted. She would not have to sneak it away from the cabin. It was a great relief. Marion was very happy that evening.

Jack was not so happy. He was climbing slowly back to his comfortless camp, wondering whether it was worth while to keep up the struggle for sake of his freedom. Jail could not be worse than this, he kept telling himself. At least there would be other human beings — he would not be alone day after day. He would be warm and no worse off for food than here. Only for his mother and the shame it would bring her, he would gladly make the exchange. He was past caring, past the horror of being humiliated before his fellows.

It was hard work climbing to the cave, but that was not the reason why he had not wanted Marion to make the trip. He did not want Marion to know that the cave was half full of snow that had blown in with the wind, and that he was compelled to dig every stick of firewood out from under a snowdrift. Only for that pile of wood, he would have moved his camp to the other side of the peak that was more sheltered, even though it was hidden from the mountain side and the lower valleys he had learned to know so well.

But the labor of moving his camp weighed heavily against the comfort he would gain. He did not believe that he would actually freeze here, now that he had the bearskin; stiff and unwieldy though it was, when he spread it with the fur next to his blankets it was warm — especially since he had bent the edges under his bed all around and let the hide set that way.

Marion would have been astonished had she known how many hours out of every twenty-four Jack spent under the strong-odored hide. Jack himself was astonished, whenever he came out of his general apathy long enough to wonder how he endured this brutish existence. But he had to save wood, and he had to save food, and he had to kill time somehow. So he crawled into his blankets long before dark, short as the days were, and he stayed there long after daylight. That is why he smoked so many cigarettes, and craved so much reading.

Lying there under the shelter of a rock shelf that jutted out from the cave wall, he would watch the whirling snow sift down through the opening in the cave's roof and pack deeper the drift upon that side. Twice he had moved his pile of supplies, and once he had moved his wood; and after that he did not much care whether they were buried or not.

Lying there with only his face and one hand out from under the covers so that he might smoke, Jack had time to do a great deal of thinking, though he tried not to think, since thinking seemed so profitless. He would watch the snow and listen to the wind whistling in the roof, and try to let them fill his mind. Sometimes he wondered how any one save an idiot could ever have contemplated passing a winter apart from his kind, in a cave on a mountain-top. Holed up with the bears, he reminded himself bitterly. And yet he had planned it eagerly with Marion and had looked forward to it as an adventure — a lark with a few picturesque hardships thrown in to give snap to the thing. Well, he had the hardships, all right enough, and the snap, but he could not see anything picturesque or adventurous about it.

He could have given it up, of course. His two legs would have carried him down to the valley in a matter of three hours or so, even with the snow hampering his progress. He could, for instance, leave his cave in the afternoon of any day, and reach Marston in plenty of time for either of the two evening trains. He could take the "up" train, whose headlight tempted him every evening when he went out to watch for it wistfully, and land in Salt Lake the next night; or he could take the "down" train a little later, and be in San Francisco the next morning. Then, it would be strange if he could not find a boat ready to leave port for some far-off, safe place. He could do that any day. He had money enough in his pocket to carry him out of the country if he were willing to forego the luxuries that come dear in travel — and he thought he could, with all this practice!

He played with the idea. He pictured himself taking the down train, and the next day shipping out of San

Francisco on a sailing vessel bound for Japan or Panama or Seattle — it did not greatly matter which. He would have to make sure first that the boat was not equipped with wireless, so he supposed he must choose a small sailing vessel, or perhaps a tramp steamer. At other times he pictured himself landing in Salt Lake and hiking out from there to find work on some ranch. Who would ever identify him there as Jack Corey?

He dreamed those things over his cigarettes, smoked parsimoniously through a cheap holder until the stub was no longer than one of Marion's fingernails that Jack loved to look at because they were always so daintily manicured. He dreamed, but he could not bring himself to the point of making one of his dreams come true. He could not, because of Marion. She had helped him to plan this retreat, she had helped him carry some of the lighter supplies up to the cave, she had stood by him like the game little pal she was. He could dream, but he could not show himself ungrateful to Marion by leaving the place. Truth to tell, when he could be with her he did not want to leave. But the times when he could be with her were so dishearteningly few that they could not hold his courage steady. She upbraided him for going so far down the mountain to meet her — what would she have said if she knew that once, when the moon was full, he had gone down to the very walls of the cabin where she slept, and had stood there like a lonesome ghost, just for the comfort her nearness gave him? Jack did not tell her that!

Jack did not tell her anything at all of his misery. He felt that it would not be "square" to worry Marion, who was doing so much for him and doing it with such whole-souled gladness, to serve a fellow being in distress. Jack did not flatter himself that she would not have done exactly as much for any other likable fellow. It was an adventure that helped to fill her empty days. He understood that perfectly, and as far as was humanly possible he let her think the adventure a pleasant one for him. He could not always control his tongue and his tones, but he made it a point to leave her as soon as he saw her beginning to doubt his contentment and well-being.

He would not even let Marion see that thoughts of his mother gnawed at him like a physical pain. He tried to hold to his old, childish resentment against her because she never spoke of his dad and did not show any affection for his dad's boy. Once she had sighed and said, "I never will forgive you, Jack, for not being a girl!" and Jack had never forgotten that, though he did forget the little laugh and the playful push she had given him afterwards. Such remarks had been always in the back of his mind, hardening him against his mother. Now they turned against Jack accusingly. Why couldn't he have been a girl? She would have gotten some comfort out of him then, instead of being always afraid that he would do something awful. She would have had him with her more, and they would have become really acquainted instead of being half strangers.

He would stare at the rock walls of the cave and remember little things he had forgotten in his roistering quest of fun. He remembered a certain wistfulness in her eyes when she was caught unawares with her gaze upon him. He remembered that never had she seemed to grudge him money — and as for clothes, he bought what he liked and never thought of the cost, and she paid the bills and never seemed to think them too large, though Jack was ashamed now at the recollection of some of them.

Why, only the week before his world had come to an end, he had said at dinner one evening that he wished he had a racing car of a certain expensive type, and his mother had done no more than lecture him mildly on the tendency of youth toward recklessness, and wonder afterwards how in the world the garage was going to be made larger without altogether destroying its symmetry and throwing it out of proportion to the rest of the place. It would make the yard look very cramped, she complained, and she should be compelled to have her row of poinsettias moved. And she very much doubted whether Jack would exercise any judgment at all about speed. Boys were *so* wild and rough, nowadays!

Well, poor mother! She had not been compelled to enlarge the garage; but Jack's throat ached when he thought of that conversation. What kind of a mother would she have been, he wondered, if he had petted her a little now and then? He had an odd longing to give her a real bear-hug and rumple up her marcelled pompadour and kiss her — and see if she wouldn't turn out to be a human-being kind of a mother, after all. He looked back and saw what a selfish, unfeeling young cub he had always been; how he had always taken, and had given nothing in return save a grudging obedience when he must, and a petty kind of deception when he might.

"Bless her heart, she'd have got me that racer and never batted an eye over the price of it," he groaned, and turned over with his face hidden even from his bleak cave. "I was always kicking over little things that don't amount to a whoop — and she was always handing out everything I asked for and never getting a square deal in her life." Then, to mark more definitely the change that was taking place in Jack's soul, he added a question that a year before would have been utterly impossible. "How do I know that dad ever gave her a square deal, either? I never saw dad since I was a kid. She's proud as the deuce — there must be some reason —"

Once full-formed in his mind, the conviction that he had been a poor sort of a son to a mother whose life had held much bitterness grew and flourished. He had called her cold and selfish; but after all, her life was spent mostly in doing things for the betterment of others — as she interpreted the word. Showy, yes; but Jack told himself now that she certainly got away with it better than any woman he knew. And when it came to being cold and selfish, it struck Jack forcibly that he had been pretty much that way himself; that he had been just as fully occupied in playing with life as his mother had been in messing around trying to reform life. When he came to think of it, he could see that a woman of Mrs. Singleton Corey's type might find it rather difficult to manifest tenderness toward a husky young son who stood off from her the way Jack had done. Judgment is, after all, a point of view, and Jack's viewpoint was undergoing a radical change.

That very change added much to his misery, because it robbed him of the comfort of pitying himself. He could do nothing now but pity his mother. As he saw it now, the crime of lying to her about that Sunday's frolic loomed blacker than the passive part he had played in the tragedy of the night. He had lied to her and thought it a joke. He had taken a car worth more than five thousand dollars — more than his young hide was worth, he told himself now — and he had driven it recklessly in the pursuit of fun that nauseated him now just to remember. Summing up that last display of ingratitude toward the mother who made his selfish life soft and easy, Jack decided that he had given her a pretty raw deal all his life, and the rawest of all on the tenth of last May.

All the while he was coaxing his fire to burn in the little rock fireplace he had built near his bed; all the while he was whittling off a slice of frozen bear meat and broiling it over the fire for his supper, Jack was steeped in self-condemnation and in pity of his mother. More than was usual she haunted him that night. Even when he crept shivering under the bearskin and blankets, and huddled there for warmth, her face was as clear before him as Marion's. Tears swelled his eyelids and slid down his cheeks. And when he brushed away those tears others came — since boyhood these were the first tears he had ever shed because of a poignant longing for his mother.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HANK BROWN PROVES THAT HE CAN READ TRACKS

TO begin with, Kate knew Mrs. Singleton Corey, just as well as a passably popular elocutionist may expect to know one of the recognized leaders of society and club life. Kate had recited at open meetings of the clubs over which Mrs. Singleton Corey had presided with that smiling composure which was so invulnerable to those without the favored circle. Kate had once talked with Mrs. Singleton Corey for at least five minutes, but she was not at all certain that she would be remembered the next time they met. She would like very much to be remembered, because an elocutionist's success depends so much upon the recognition which society gives to her personality and her talents.

Now, here was Jack Corey hiding in her very dooryard, one might say; and his mother absolutely distracted over him. How could she make any claim to human sympathy for a mother's sorrow if she withheld the message that would bring relief? She was astonished that Marion had been so thoughtless as never once to think of the terrible distress of Mrs. Singleton Corey.

Of course, she had promised — but surely that did not exclude the boy's mother from the solace of knowing where he was! That would be outrageous! Very carefully she sounded Marion upon the subject, and found her unreasonable.

"Why, Jack would murder me if I told his mother! I should say I wouldn't tell her! Why, it was because his mother was going to be so mean about it and turn against him, that Jack ran away! He'd go back, if it wasn't for her — he said so. He'd rather go to jail than face her. Why, if I thought for a minute that you'd take that stand, I never would have told you, Kate! Don't you *dare* —" Then Marion dropped a saucer that she was wiping, and when her consternation over the mishap had subsided she awoke to the fact that Kate had dropped the subject also and had gone to read her limp little *Sonnets from the Portuguese,* that Marion never could see any sense in.

Marion must have had a remarkably trustful nature, else she would have been suspicious. Kate was not paying any attention to what she read. She was mentally rounding periods and coining new phrases of sympathy that should not humiliate but draw close to the writer the soul of Mrs. Singleton Corey when she read them. She was planning the letter she fully intended to write. Later that evening, when Marion was curled up in bed with a book that held her oblivious to unobtrusive deeds, such as letter-writing, Kate put the phrases and the carefully constructed sentences upon a sheet of her thickest, creamiest stationery. She did not feel in the slightest degree disloyal to Marion or to Jack. Hot-headed, selfish children, what did they know about the deeper problems of life? Of course his mother must be told. And of course, Kate was the person who could best write so difficult a letter. So she wrote it, and explained just how she came to know about Jack. But the professor was a conscientious man. He believed that the authorities should be notified at once. Jack Corey was a fugitive from the law, and to conceal the knowledge of his whereabouts would be nothing short of compounding a felony. It was thoughtful to write his mother, of course. But duty demanded that the chief of police in Los Angeles should be notified also, and as speedily as possible. By George, the case warranted telegraphing the news!

Now, it was one thing to write sympathetically to a social leader that her wayward son has been found, but it is quite another thing to turn the wayward son over to the police. Kate had not considered the moral uprightness of the professor when she showed him the letter, but she managed the difficulty very nicely. She pleaded a little, and flattered a little, and cried a good deal, and finally persuaded the professor's conscience to compound a felony to the extent of writing Fred instead of wiring the chief of police. Fred could notify the authorities if he chose — and Kate was wise enough to pretend that she was satisfied to leave the matter in Fred's hands.

She thought it best, however, to add a postscript to her letter, saying that she feared for Jack's safety, as the authorities had begun to be very inquisitive and hard to put off; but that she would do all in her power to protect the poor boy. She did not feel that it would be wise to write Fred, because the professor would think she was working against him and would be angry. Besides, she knew that it would be of no use to write Fred. He would do as he pleased anyway; he always did.

In the face of a keen wind the professor started down the mountain to leave the letters at Marston with the agent, who was very obliging and would see that they were put on the "down" train that evening.

Marion did not see any sense in his going away that day, and she told Kate so very bluntly. With the professor gone she could not meet Jack and have those broiled bear steaks, because some one had to stay with Kate. When Kate suggested that she have Jack come to the cabin with his bear steaks, she discovered that she could not do that either. She was afraid to tell Jack that Kate knew. Of course, it was all right — Kate had promised faithfully never to tell; but Jack was awfully queer, lately, and the least little thing offended him. He would refuse to see that it was the best to take Kate into the secret, because it gave Marion more freedom to do things for his comfort. He would consider that she had been tattling secrets just because she could not hold her tongue, and she resented in advance his attitude. Guiltily conscious of having betrayed him, she still believed that she had done him a real service in the betrayal.

It was a complicated and uncomfortable state of mind to be in, and Kate's state of mind was not much more complacent. She also had broken a promise and betrayed a trust, and she also believed she had done it for the good of the betrayed. To their discomforting sense of guilt was added Marion's disappointment at not meeting Jack, and Kate's sprained ankle, which was as swollen and painful as a sprained ankle usually is. They began by arguing, they continued by reminding each other of past slights and injuries, they ended by speaking plain truths that were unpalatable chiefly because they were true. When the professor tramped home at sundown he walked into an atmosphere of icy silence. Kate and Marion were not on speaking terms, if you please.

The next day was cold and windy, but Marion hurried the housework in a way that made Kate sniff disgustedly, and started out to signal Jack and bring him down to their last meeting place. Flash after flash she sent that way, until the sun went altogether behind the clouds and she could signal no more. Not a glimmer of an answering twinkle could she win from the peak. The most she did was to stimulate old Mike to the point of mumbling wild harangues to the uneasy pines, the gist of which was that folks better look out how they went spyin' around after *him,* an' makin' signs back and forth with glasses. They better look out, because he had good eyes, if Murphy didn't have, and they couldn't run over *him* and tromp on him.

He was still gesticulating like a bear fighting yellow-jackets when Marion walked past him, going up the trail. She looked at him and smiled as she went by, partly because he looked funny, waving his arms over his head like that, and partly by way of greeting. She never talked to Mike, because she could not understand anything he said. She did not consider him at all bright, so she did not pay much attention to him at any time; certainly not now, when her mind was divided between her emotions concerning Jack and her fresh quarrel with Kate.

Mike struck his axe into a log and followed her, keeping in the brush just outside the trail. His lips moved ceaselessly under his ragged, sandy mustache. Because Marion had smiled when she looked at him, he called her, among other things, a she-devil. He thought she had laughed at him because she was nearly ready to have him hanged. Marion did not look back. She was quite certain today that Kate would not follow her, and the professor was fagged from yesterday's tramp through the snow. She hurried, fully expecting that Jack had gone down early to the meeting place and was waiting for her there.

Mike had no trouble in keeping close to her, for the wind blew strongly against her face and the pines creaked and mourned overhead, and had he called to her she would scarcely have heard him. She left the road at the top of the hill and went across to the gully where Kate had sprained her ankle. Today Marion did not trouble to choose bare ground, so she went swiftly. At the top of the gully where Jack had met her before, she stopped, her eyes inquiring of every thicket near her. She was panting from the stiff climb, and her cheeks tingled with the cold. But presently she " who-whoed " cautiously, and a figure stepped out from behind a cedar and came toward her.

" Oh, there you — oh! " she cried, and stopped short. It was not Jack Corey at all, but Hank Brown, grinning at her while he shifted his rifle from the right hand to the left.

"Guess you thought I was somebody else," he drawled, coming up to her and putting out his hand. "Pretty cold, ain't it? Yuh travelin' or just goin' somewheres?" He grinned again over the ancient witticism.

"Oh, I — I was just out for a walk," Marion laughed uneasily. "Where are you going, Mr. Brown?"

"Me, I'm travelin' fer my health. Guess you aim t' git walkin' enough, comin' away over here, this kind of a day."

"Why, I hike all over these mountains. It gets lonesome. I just walk and walk everywhere."

Grinning, Hank glanced down at her feet. "Yes, I've seen lots of tracks up around this way, and up towards Taylor Rock. But I never thought they were made by feet as little as what yours are."

"Why, forevermore! I suppose I ought to thank you for that. I make pretty healthy looking tracks, let me tell you. And I don't claim all the tracks, because so many hunters come up here."

Hank looked at her from under his slant eyebrows. "Guess they's some that ain't crazy about huntin' too," he observed shrewdly. "Feller that had the lookout last summer, guess he hangs out somewhere around here, don't he? Must, or you wouldn't be calling him. Got a claim, maybe."

"Why do you think so? I go all over these hills, and I —"

"I was kinder wonderin'," said Hank. "I guess you must know 'im purty well. I just happened to notice how clost them two sets of tracks are, over by that big tree. Like as if somebody with kinda little feet had stood around talking to a feller for quite a spell. I kinda make a study of tracks, you see — 'cause I hunt a good deal. Ever study tracks?"

"Why, no —" Marion's smile became set and superficial. "I do wish you'd teach me, Mr. Brown."

"Well, come on over here and I'll show yuh somethin'." He reached over and laid his hand on her arm, and after an involuntarily shrinking, Marion thought it wisest to let it pass. Very likely he did not mean anything at all beyond eagerness to show her the tracks. Why in the world had they forgotten to be careful, she wondered. But it was hard to remember that this wilderness was not really so untrodden as it looked when she and Jack found themselves alone in some remote spot. She went fearfully, with uneasy laughter, where Hank led. They stopped beside the tree where she and Jack had talked the other day. Hank pointed down at the telltale snow.

"It's dead easy to read tracks," he drawled, "when they's fresh and plain as what these are. They's four cigarette butts, even, to show how long the feller stood here talkin' to the girl. And behind the tree it's all tromped up, where he waited fer her to come, most likely. You kin see where his tracks comes right out from behind the tree to the place where they stood talkin'. An' behind the tree there ain't no cigarette butts a-tall — an' that's when a feller most generally smokes — when he's passin' the time waitin' fer somebody. An' here's a string — like as if it had been pulled off'n a package an' throwed away. An' over there on that bush is the paper the string was tied aroun' — wind blowed it over there, I guess." He waded through the snow to where the paper had lodged, and picked it up. "It's even got a pos'mark onto it," he announced, "and part of the address. It must a'been quite a sizable package, 'cause it took foteen cents to send it from Los Angeles to Miss Marion —"

"Why, what do you know about that!" cried Marion abruptly, bringing her hands together animatedly. "All that's left of my opera fudge that one of the girls sent me!" She took the paper and glanced at it ruefully. "I remember now — that was the time Fred was sure he'd get a —" she stopped herself and looked at him archly — "a jack-rabbit. And I said I'd come out and help him carry it home. But he didn't have any luck at all — why, of course, I remember! Meeting the professor with the mail, and bringing the candy along to eat if we got hungry — and we did too. And Fred hid behind the tree and scared me — why, Mr. Brown, I think you're perfectly wonderful, to figure that all out just from the tracks! I should think you'd be a detective. I'm sure there isn't a detective in the country that could beat you — really, they are stupid alongside of such work as this. But I hope the tracks won't tell you what Fred said about not getting the — er — the rabbit he shot at!" She laughed up into his face. "You might tell," she accused him playfully, "and get us all into trouble. I'm awfully afraid of you, Mr. Brown. I am really."

Hank Brown could read tracks fairly well, but he could not read women at all. His puzzled gaze went from Marion's laughing face to the tracks in the snow; from there to the paper in his hand; to the tree, and back again to her face.

"The man's tracks went back towards Taylor Rock," he drawled out half apologetically. "That's what made me kinda think maybe —"

"Oh, you know that, too! You know how he said he was going up there and see if he couldn't run across a bear before sundown, and for me to go straight home.

And I'll bet," she added breathlessly, "you can tell me exactly where it was that Kate waited for me across the gulley, and which ankle it was that she sprained so I had to almost carry her back to the house, and — why, I wouldn't be one bit surprised if you could tell me what I put on it!"

"No," Hank confessed feebly, "I guess I couldn't just figure all that out, not offhand like."

"But you knew about Fred forgetting his cigarettes, and about my bringing him some so he wouldn't be grouchy all the way home," Marion reminded him demurely. "I — I do think you are the cleverest boy!"

That finished Hank. Never within his recollection had a young woman so much as hinted that she thought him wonderful or clever. Besides, Hank was well past thirty, and it tickles a man of that age to be called a boy.

He began to leer at her with amorous eyes when he spoke, and he began to find frequent occasions for taking hold of her arm. He managed to make himself odious in the extreme, so that in sheer self-defense Marion made haste to bring his thoughts back to Jack.

"Did you say that lookout man has a claim up here somewhere?" She started back to the road, Hank keeping close to her heels.

"I dunno — I just said maybe he had. He's up here, I know that — an' you know it, too." He took her arm to help her up the hill, and Marion felt as though a toad was touching her; yet she dared not show too plainly her repulsion for fear of stirring his anger. She had a feeling that Hank's anger would be worse than his boorish gallantry. "I figure he's on the dodge. Ain't no other reason why he ain't never been to town sence I packed him up to the lookout station las' spring. 'F he had a claim he'd be goin' to town sometime, anyway. He'd go in to record his claim, an' he ain't never done that. I'll bet," he added, walking close alongside, "you could tell more'n you let on. Couldn't you, ay?"

"I could, if I knew anything to tell." Marion tried to free her arm without actually jerking it, and failed.

"But you don't, ay? Say, you're pretty cute. What'll yuh give me if I tell yuh what I do think?"

The fool was actually trying to slip his arm around her without being too abrupt about it; as if he were taming some creature of the wild which he wished not to frighten. Marion was drawing herself together, balancing herself to land a blow on his jaw and then run. She believed she could outrun him, now that they were in the trail. But at that moment she caught sight of a figure slinking behind a stump, and she exclaimed with relief at the sight.

"Why, there's Mike over there — I was wishing — I wanted to ask him — oh, Mike! Mike!" She pulled herself free of Hank's relaxing fingers and darted from the trail, straight up the park-like slope of the giant pines. "Mike! Wait a minute, Mike. I was looking for you!"

It was an unfortunate sentence, that last one. Mike stopped long enough to make sure that she was coming, long enough to hear what she said. Then he ducked and ran, lumbering away toward a heavy outcropping of rock that edged the slope like a halibut's fin. Marion ran after him, glancing now and then over her shoulder, thankful because Hank had stayed in the trail and she could keep the great tree trunks between them.

At the rock wall, so swift was Marion's pursuit, Mike turned at bay, both hands lifted over his head in a threatening gesture. "Don't yuh chase me up," he gobbled frenziedly. "Yuh better look out now! Don't yuh think yuh can take *me* and hang me for a spy — you're a spy yourself — You look out, now!" Then he saw that Marion kept on coming, and he turned and ran like a scared animal.

Though she could not understand what he said, nevertheless Marion stopped in sheer astonishment. The next moment Mike had disappeared between two boulders and was gone. Marion followed his tracks to the rocks; then, fearful of Hank, she turned and ran down the slope that seemed to slant into Toll-Gate Basin. Hank could track her, of course, but she meant to keep well ahead of him. So she ran until she must climb the next slope. Once she saw Mike running ahead of her through the trees. She wondered what ailed him, but she was too concerned over her own affairs to give him much thought. Hank called to her; he seemed to be coming after her, and she supposed he would overtake her in time, but she kept on through brush and over fallen logs half buried in the snow that held her weight if she was careful. And when she was almost ready to despair of reaching the open before Hank, she saw through the trees the little pasture with its log fence. Mike was going across to his cabin, still running awkwardly.

Marion ploughed through the drifts in the edge of the timber and slowed thankfully to a walk when she reached the corner of the fence. Across the flat the cabin stood backed against the wall of heavy forest. Hank would not dare come any farther — or if he did he would be careful not to offend. She walked on more slowly, pulling herself back to composure before she went in to face the critical, censuring eyes of Kate.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

TROUBLE ROCKS THE PAN, LOOKING FOR GRAINS OF GOLD

UP on the peaks Jack was touching the heights and the depths of his own nature, while the mountains stood back and waited, it seemed to him, for the final answer. He had lived with them too long and too intimately to disregard them now, uninfluenced by their varying moods. He watched them in sunlight when they were all shining white and violet and soft purple, with great shadows spread over their slopes where the forests stood deepest; and they heartened him, gave him a wordless promise that better times were to come. He saw them swathed with clouds, and felt the chill of their cold aloofness; the world was a gloomy place then, and friendship was all false and love a mockery. He saw them at night — then was he an outcast from everything that made life worth while; then was he almost ready to give up.

When he had waited until the sun was low, and Marion did not come or send him a signal from the little knoll behind the cabin, he told himself that he was just a whim of hers; that he merely furnished her with a little amusement, gave her a pleasant imitation of adventure; that if something more exciting came into her dull life there in the Basin, she would never bother with him again. He told himself cynically that she would merely be proving her good sense if she stopped meeting him or sending those brief little messages; but Lord, how they did put heart into a fellow! — those little dots of brightness, with now and then a wider, longer splash of radiance, which she told him meant "forevermore"; or, if it were very long and curved, as when she waved the glass over her head, it meant a laugh, and "here's hoping."

But when she did not come, or even run up the hill and send him the one-two-three signal which meant she could not meet him that day, he faced the long night feeling that the world held not one friend upon whom he could depend. The next day he went out, but he was so absolutely hopeless that he persuaded himself she would not come and that he did not want her to come. He did not want to meet any human being that he could think of — except his mother, and his punishment was that he should never see her again. He had to walk for exercise, and he might get a shot at a grouse. He was not going to meet Marion at all. Let her stay at home, if she wanted to — he could stand it if she could.

He tramped down the mountain toward the Basin. It was a dreary journey at best, and today his perverse mood would not let him brighten it with the hope of seeing Marion. She had fooled him the day before, after she had promised to come, and he had carried that chunk of bear meat all the way down from the cave, so now he was going to fool her. If she came he would just let her stand around in the cold, and see how funny it was to wait for some one who did not show up.

Near their last meeting place, on the brink of the deep gulley that divided the Crystal Lake road from the first slope of Grizzly Peak, he stopped, half tempted to turn back. She was keen-eyed, and he did not want her to see him first. She should not have the chance, he reflected, to think he was crazy about meeting her every day. If she wanted to make it once a week, she wouldn't find him whining about it. He moved warily on down to the place, his eyes searching every open spot for a glimpse of her.

He got his glimpse just as she and Hank were climbing the side of the gulley to the road. It was a glimpse that shocked him out of his youthful self-pity and stood him face to face with a very real hurt. They were climbing in plain sight, and so close to him that he could hear Hank's drawling voice telling Marion that she was a cute one, all right; he'd have to hand it to her for being a whole lot cuter than he had sized her up to be. Uncouth praise it was, bald, insincere, boorish. Jack heard Marion laugh, just as though she enjoyed Hank's conversation and company — and all his anger at yesterday's apparent slight seemed childish beside this hot, man's rage that filled him.

Any man walking beside Marion would have made him wild with jealousy; but Hank Brown! Hank Brown, holding her by the arm, walking with her more familiarly than Jack had ever ventured to do, for all their close friendship! Calling her cute — why cute, in particular? Did Hank, by any chance, refer to Marion's little strategies in getting things for Jack? The bare possibility sickened him.

He stood and watched until they reached the trail and passed out of sight among the trees, their voices growing fainter as the distance and the wind blurred the sounds. Had they looked back while they were climbing out of the gulley, they must have seen him, for he stood out in the open, making no attempt at concealment, not even thinking of the risk. When they had gone, he stood staring at the place and then turned and tramped apathetically back to his cave.

What was Marion doing with Hank Brown, the one man in all this country who held a definite grudge against Jack? What had she done, that Hank should consider her so cute? Was the girl playing double? Loyalty was a part of Jack's nature — a fault, he had come to call it nowadays, since he firmly believed it was loyalty toward his father that had cost him his mother's love; since it was loyalty to his friends, too, that had sent him out of Los Angeles in the gray of the morning; since it was loyalty to Marion that had held him here hiding miserably like an animal. Loyalty to Marion made it hard now to believe his own eyes when they testified against her.

There must be some way of explaining it, he kept telling himself hopelessly. Marion — why, the girl simply *couldn't* pretend all the time. She would forget herself some time, no matter how clever she was at deception. She couldn't keep up a make-believe interest in his welfare, the way she had done; if she could do that — well, like Hank Brown, he would have to hand it to her for being a lot cleverer than he had given her credit for being. "If she's been faking the whole thing, she ought to go on the stage," he muttered tritely. "She'd make Sarah Bernhardt look like a small-time extra. Yes, sir, all of that. And I don't quite get it that way." Then he swore. "Hank Brown! That hick — after having her choice of town boys, her taking up with that Keystone yap! No, sir, that don't get by with me." But when he had gone a little farther he stopped and looked blackly down toward the Basin. A swift, hateful vision of the two figures walking close together up that slope struck him like a slap in the face.

"All but had his arm around her," he growled. "And she let him get by with it! And laughed at his hick talk. Huh! Hank Brown! I admire her taste, I must say!"

Up near the peak the wind howled through the pines, bringing with it the bite of cold. His shoulders drawn together with the chill that struck through even his heavy sweater and coat, he went on, following the tracks he had made coming down. They were almost obliterated with the snow, that went slithering over the drifts like a creeping cloud, except when a heavier gust lifted it high in air and flung it out in a blinding swirl. Battling with that wind sent the warmth through his body again, but his hands and feet were numb when he skirted the highest, deepest, solidest drift of them all and crept into the desolate fissure that was the opening to his lair.

Inside it was more dismal than out on the peak, if that could be. The wind whistled through the openings in the roof, the snow swirled down and lay uneasily where it fell. His camp-fire was cheerless, sifted over with white. His bed under the ledge looked cold and comfortless, with the raw, frozen hide of the bear on top, a dingy blank fringe of fur showing at the edges.

Jack stood just inside, his shoulders again hunched forward, his chilled fingers doubled together in his pockets, and looked around him. He always did that when he came back, and he always felt nearly the same heartsick shrinking away from its cold dreariness. The sun never shone in there, for one thing. The nearest it ever came was to gild the north rim of the opening during the middle of the day.

Today its chill desolation struck deeper than ever, but he went stolidly forward and started a little fire with a splinter or two of pitch that he had carried up from a log down below. Hank had taught him the value of pitch pine, and Jack remembered it now with a wry twist of the lips. He supposed he ought to be grateful to Hank for that much, but he was not.

He melted snow in a smoky tin bucket and made a little coffee in another bucket quite as black. All his food was frozen, of course, but he stirred up a little batter with self-rising buckwheat flour and what was left of the snow water, whittled off a few slices of bacon, fried that and afterwards cooked the batter in the grease, watching lest the thick cake burn before it had cooked in the center. He laid the slices of bacon upon half of the cake, folded the other half over upon them, squatted on his heels beside the fire and ate the ungainly sandwich and drank the hot black coffee sweetened and with a few of the coarser grains floating on top. While he ate he stared unseeingly into the fire, that sputtered and hissed when an extra sifting of snow came down upon it. The cave was dusky by now, so that the leaping flames made strange shadows on the uneven rock walls. The whistle of the wind had risen to a shriek.

Jack roused himself when the fire began to die; he stood up and looked around him, and down at his ungainly clothes and heavy, high-cut shoes laced over thick gray socks whose tops were turned down in a roll over his baggy, dirt-stained trousers. He laughed without any sound of mirth, thinking that this was the Jack Corey who had quarreled over the exact shade of tie that properly belonged to a certain shade of shirt; whose personal taste in sport clothes had been aped and imitated by half the fellows he knew. What would they think if they could look upon him now? He wondered if Stit Duffy would wag his head and say "So-me cave, bo, so-me cave!"

Then his mind snapped back to Hank Brown with his hand clasping Marion's arm in that leisurely climb to the trail. His black mood returned, pressing the dead weight of hopelessness upon him. He might as well settle the whole thing with a bullet, he told himself again. After all, what would it matter? Who would care? Last night he had thought instantly of Marion and his mother, and he had felt that two women would grieve for him. Tonight he thought of Marion and cast the thought away with a curse and a sneer. As for his mother — would his mother care so very much? Had he given her any reason for caring, beyond the natural maternal instinct which is in all motherhood? He did not know. If he could be sure that his mother would grieve for him — but he did not know. Perhaps she had grieved over him in the past until she had worn out all emotions where he was concerned. He wondered, and he wished that he knew.

CHAPTER TWENTY

IGNORANCE TAKES THE TRAIL OF DANGER

MIKE, looking frequently over his shoulder, sought the sanctuary of his own cabin, slammed the door shut and pulled the heavy table as a barricade against it until he could find the hammer and some nails. His hands shook so that he struck his thumb twice, but he did not seem to notice the pain at all. When the door was nailed shut he pulled a side off a box and nailed the two boards over the window. Then he grabbed his rifle out of a corner and defied the spies to do their worst, and hang him if they dared.

A long time he waited, mumbling there in the middle of the room, the rifle pointed toward the door. Shadows flowed into the valley and filled it so that only the tops of the tallest pines were lighted by the sun. The lonesome gloom deepened and the pines swung their limber tops and talked with the sound of moving waters along a sandy shore.

An owl flapped heavily into a tall pine near by, settled his feet comfortably upon a smooth place in the limb, craned his neck and blinked into the wind, fluffed his feathers and in a deep baritone voice he called aloud upon his errant mate.

"Who! Who! Who-who!"

Mike jumped and swung his rifle toward the sound! "Oh, yuh needn't think yuh can fool me, makin' si'nals like an owl," he cried in his indistinct gobble. "I know what you're up to. Yuh can't fool me!"

Far across the basin the mate, in a lighter, more spirited tone, called reassuring reply:

"Who-who-who-o-o!"

"Who! Who! Who-who!" admonished the owl by the cabin, and flapped away to the other.

Mike's sandy hair lifted on the back of his neck. His face turned pasty gray in the deep gloom of the cabin. Spies they were, and they were laying their trap for him. The one who had called like an owl was Hank Brown. The one who had answered across the flat was the girl, maybe — or perhaps it was that other spy up on top of the mountain; Mike was not sure, but the menace to himself remained as great, whichever spy answered Hank Brown. Hank Brown had trailed him to the cabin, and was telling the others about it. Mike was so certain of it that he actually believed he had seen Hank's form dimly revealed beside a pine tree.

He waited, the gun in his hands. He did not think of supper. He did not realize that he was cold, or hungry, or that as the evening wore on his tortured muscles cried out for rest. The sight of Hank Brown talking intimately with Marion — allied with the spies, as Mike's warped reason interpreted the meeting — had given him the feeling that he was hedged about with deadly foes. The sudden eagerness which Marion had shown when she saw him, and the way she had run after him, to him meant nothing less than an attempt to capture him then and there. They would come to the cabin when he was asleep — he was sure of it. So he did not intend to sleep at all. He would watch for them with the gun. He guessed they didn't know he had a gun, because he never used it unless he went hunting. And since the county was filled up with spies on the government he was too cute to let them catch him hunting out of season.

He waited and he waited. After a long while he backed to the bed and sat down, but he kept the gun pointed toward the door and the window. A skunk came prowling through the trampled snow before the cabin, hunting food where Mike had thrown out slops from the cooking. It rattled a tin can against a half-buried rock, and Mike was on his feet, shaking with cold and excitement.

"Oh, I c'n hear yuh, all right!" he shouted fiercely, not because he was brave, but because he was scared and could not await calmly the next move. "Don't yuh come around here, er I'll shoot!"

In a minute he thought he heard stealthy footsteps nearing the door, and without taking any particular aim he lifted the hammer of the gun and pulled the trigger, in a panicky instinct to fight. The odor that assailed his nostrils reassured him suffocatingly. It was not the spies after all.

He put down the gun then, convinced that if the spies had been hanging around, they would know now that he was ready for them, and would not dare tackle him that night. He felt vaingloriously equal to them all. Let them come! He'd show 'em a thing or two.

Groping in the dark to the old cookstove, Mike raked together the handful of pitch-pine shavings which he had whittled that morning for his dinner fire. He reached up to the shelf where the matches were kept, lighted the shavings, laid them carefully in the firebox and fed the little blaze with dry splinters. He placed wood upon the crackling pile, rattled the stove-lids into place and crouched shivering beside the stove, trying to absorb some warmth into his chilled old bones. He opened the oven door, hitched himself closer and thrust his numbed feet into the oven. He sat there mumbling threats and puny warnings, and so coaxed a little warmth into his courage as well as his body.

So he passed the rest of that night, huddled close to the stove, hearing the murmur of his enemies in the uneasy swashing together of the pine branches overhead, reading a signal into every cry of the animals that prowled through the woods. The harsh squall of a mountain-lion, somewhere down the creek, set him shivering. He did not believe it was a mountain lion, but the call of those who watched his cabin. So daylight found him mumbling beside the stove, his old rifle across his knees with the muzzle pointing toward the nailed door.

He wished that Murphy would come; and in the next moment he was cursing Murphy for being half in league with the plotters, and hoping Murphy never showed his face again in the cabin; making threats, too, of what he would do if Murphy came around sneering about the spies.

With daylight came a degree of sanity, and Mike built up the fire again and cooked his breakfast. Habit reasserted itself and he went off to his work, muttering his rambling thoughts as he shambled along the path he and Murphy had beaten in the snow. But he carried his rifle, which he had never done before, and he stood it close beside him while he worked. Also he kept an eye on the trail and on Toll-Gate cabin. He would have been as hard to catch unaware that day as a weasel.

Once or twice he saw the professor pottering around near the cabin, gathering pieces of bark off fallen trees to help out their scanty supply of dry wood. The pines still mourned and swayed to the wind, which hung in the storm quarter, and the clouds marched soddenly in the opposite direction or hung almost motionless for a space. The professor did not come within hailing distance, and seemed wholly occupied with gathering what bark he could carry home before the storm, but Mike was not reassured, nor was he thrown off his guard.

He waited until noon, expecting to see the girl come out for more plotting. When she did not, he went back and cooked a hot dinner, thinking that the way to get the best of spies on the government is to watch them closer than they watch you, and to be ready to follow them when they go off in the woods to plot. So he ate as much as he could swallow, and filled his pockets with bacon and bread. He meant to keep on their trail this time, and see just what they were up to.

Marion, however, did not venture out of the cabin. She was very much afraid that Hank Brown was suspicious of Jack and was trying to locate Jack's camp. She was also afraid of Hank on her own account, and she did not want to see him ever again. She was certain that he had tried hard to overtake her when she went running after Mike, and that she had escaped him only by being as swift-footed as he, and by having the start of him.

Then Kate could not walk at all, and with the professor busy outside, common decency kept Marion in the house. She would like to have sent Jack a heliograph message, but she did not dare with the professor prowling around hunting dry limbs and bark. She had no confidence in the professor's potential kindness toward a fellow in Jack's predicament — the professor was too good to be trusted. He would tell the police.

Normally she would have told Kate about Hank Brown, would have asked Kate's advice, for Kate was practical when she forgot herself long enough to be perfectly natural. But she and Kate were speaking only when it was absolutely necessary to speak, and discussion was therefore out of the question. She felt penned up, miserable. What if Hank Brown found out about Jack and set the sheriff on his trail? He would, she believed, if he knew — for he hated Jack because of that fight. Jack had told her about it, keeping the cause fogged in generalities.

All that night the wind howled up the mountainside and ranted through the forest so that Marion could not sleep. Twice she heard a tree go splitting down through the outstretched arms of its close neighbors, to fall with a crash that quivered the cabin. She was glad that Jack's camp was in a cave. She would have been terribly worried if he had to stay out where a tree might fall upon him. She pictured the horror of being abroad in the forest with the dark and that raging wind. She hoped that the morning would bring calm, because she wanted to see Jack again and take him some magazines, and tell him about Hank.

In the morning it was snowing and raining by turns, with gusty blasts of wind. Marion looked out, even opened the door and stood upon the step; but the storm dismayed her so that she gave up the thought of going, until a chance sentence overheard while she was making the professor's bed in the little lean-to changed her plan of waiting into one of swift action. She heard Douglas say to Kate that, if Fred did decide to inform the chief of police, they should be hearing something very soon now. With the trial probably started, they would certainly waste no time. They would wire up to the sheriff here.

"Oh, I wish you hadn't told Fred," Kate began to expostulate, when Marion burst in upon them furiously.

"You told, did you?" she accused Kate tempestuously. "Doug, of all people! You knew the little runt couldn't keep his hands off — you knew he'd be so darned righteous he'd make all the trouble he could for other people, because he hasn't got nerve enough to do anything wrong himself. You couldn't keep it to yourself, for all your promises and your crocodile tears! I ought to have known better than trust you with anything. But I'll tell you one thing more, you two nasty nice creatures that are worse than scrawling snakes — I'll tell you this: It won't do you one particle of good to set the police after Jack. So go ahead and tell, and be just as treacherous and mean as you like. You won't have the pleasure of sending him to jail — because they'll never catch him. My heavens, how I despise and loathe you two!"

While she spat venom at them she was stamping her feet into her overshoes, buttoning her sweater, snatching up this thing and that thing she wanted, drawing a woolly Tam O'Shanter cap down over her ears, hooking a cheap fur neckpiece that she had to tug and twist because it fitted so tightly over her sweater collar. She took her six-shooter — she was still deadly afraid of Hank Brown — and she got her muff that matched the neck fur. Her eyes blazed whenever she looked at them.

"Marion, listen to reason! You *can't* go out in this storm!" Kate began to whimper.

"Will you please shut up?" Marion whirled on her, primitive, fighting rage contorting her face. "I can go anywhere I like. I only wish I could go where I'd never see you again." She went out and pulled the door violently shut. Stood a minute to brace herself for what she had to do, and went into the storm as a swimmer breasts the breakers.

After her went Mike, scuttling away from his cabin with his rifle swinging from his right hand, his left fumbling the buttons on his coat.

At the fence corner Marion hesitated, standing with her back to the wind, the snow driving past her with that faint hiss of clashing particles which is the voice of a sleeting blizzard. She could take the old, abandoned road which led up over the ridge topped by Taylor Rock, and she would find the walking easier, perhaps. But the road followed the line of least resistance through the hills, and that line was by no means straight. Jack would probably be in the cave, out of the storm; she had no hope of meeting him over on the slope on such a day. Still, he might start down the mountain, and at any rate it would be the shortest way up there. She turned down along the fence, following the trail as she had done before, with Mike coming after her as though he was stalking game: warily, swiftly, his face set and eager, his eyes shining with the hunting lust.

Up the hill she went, bracing herself against the wind where it swept through open spaces, shivering with the cold of it, fearful of the great roaring overhead where the pinetops swayed drunkenly with clashing branches: Dead limbs broke and came crashing down, bringing showers of snow and bark and broken twigs and stripped needles from the resisting branches in their path. She was afraid, so she went as fast as she could, consoling her fear with the shrewd thought that the storm would serve to hold back the sheriff and give Jack time to get away somewhere. No one would dream of his traveling on such a day as this, she kept telling herself over and over. It was getting worse instead of better; the snow was coming thicker and the sleet was lessening. It was going to be quite a climb to the cave; the wind must be simply terrible up there, but she could see now that Jack would never expect her out in such weather, and so he would stay close to the camp fire.

At the top of the hill the wind swooped upon her and flung clouds of snow into her face so that she was half blinded. She turned her back upon it, blinked rapidly until her vision cleared again, and stood there panting, tempted to turn back. No one would be crazy enough to venture out today. They would wait until the storm cleared.

She looked back down the trail she had followed.

Wherever the wind had a clean sweep her tracks were filling already with snow. If she did not wait, and if Jack got away now, they couldn't track him at all. She really owed him that much of a chance to beat them. She put up her muff, shielded her face from the sting of frozen snowflakes, and went on, buffeted down the steep slope where Kate had sprained her ankle, and thinking that she must be careful where she set her feet, because it would be frightful if she had such an accident herself.

She did not expect to meet Jack on the farther edge of the gulch, but she stood a minute beside the great pine, looking at the trampled snow and thinking of Hank Brown's leering insinuations. Whatever had started the fellow to suspecting such things? Uneasily she followed Hank's cunning reasoning: Because Jack had never once gone in to Quincy, except to settle with the Forest Service for his summer's work; because Jack had not filed upon any claim in the mountains, yet stayed there apart from his kind; because he avoided people — such little things they were that made up the sum of Hank's suspicions! Well, she was to blame for this present emergency, at any rate. If she had not told Kate something she had no right to tell, she would not have quite so much to worry about.

She turned and began to climb again, making her way through the thicket that fringed the long ridge beyond; like a great, swollen tongue reaching out toward the valley was this ridge, and she followed it in spite of the tangled masses of young trees and bushes which she must fight through to reach the more open timber. At least the danger of falling trees and branches was not so great here, and the wind was not quite so keen.

Behind her Mike followed doggedly, trailing her like a hound. Days spent in watching, nights spent crouched and waiting had brought him to the high pitch of desperation, that would stop at nothing which seemed to his crazed brain necessary to save his life and his freedom. Even the disdainful Murphy would have known the man was insane; but Murphy was sitting warm and snug beside a small table with a glass ready to his right hand, and Murphy was not worrying about Mike's sanity, but about the next card that would fall before him. Murphy thought how lucky he was to be in Quincy during this storm, instead of cooped up in the little cabin with Mike, who would sit all day and mumble, and never say anything worth listening to. So Mike kept to the hunt — like a gentle-natured dog gone mad and dangerous and taking the man-trail unhindered and unsuspected.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

GOLD OF REPENTANCE, SUNLIGHT OF LOVE AND A MAN GONE MAD

MARION was up at the foot of the last grilling climb, the steep acclivity where manzanita shrubs locked arms and laughed at the climber. Fearful of a sprained ankle like Kate's, she had watched carefully where she set down her feet and had not considered that it would be wise to choose just as carefully the route she should follow to gain the top; so long as she was climbing in that general direction she felt no uneasiness, because Taylor Rock topped it all, and she was bound to come out somewhere close to the point at which she was aiming.

But the wall of manzanita stopped her before she had penetrated a rod into it. One solid mass blanketed with snow it looked to be when she stepped carefully upon a rock and surveyed the slope. She had borne too far to the right, away from the staggering rush of wind. She hated to turn now and face the storm while she made her way around to the line of timber, but she had no choice. So she retreated from the manzanita and fought her way around it — finding it farther than she had dreamed; finding, too, that the storm was a desperate thing, if one had to face it for long in the open.

She made the timber, and stood leaning against the sheltered side of a dark-trunked spruce whose branches were thick and wide-spread enough to shield her. The physical labor of fighting her way thus far, and the high altitude to which she had attained, made her pant like a runner just after the race. She held her muff to her face again for the sense of warmth and well-being its soft fur gave to her cheeks. Certainly, no one else would be fool enough to come out on such a day, she thought. And what a surprise to Jack, seeing her come puffing into his cave! She had not been there since the snow fell, just before Thanksgiving. Now it was nearly Christmas — a month of solitary grandeur Jack had endured.

She glanced up at the tossing boughs above her; felt the great tree trunk quiver when a fresh blast swept the top; looked out at the misty whiteness of the storm, clouded with swaying pine branches. What a world it was! But she was not afraid of it; somehow she felt its big, rough friendliness even now. It did not occur to her that the mountains could work her ill, though she reminded herself that standing still was not the best way to keep warm on such a day.

She started up again, ignorantly keeping among the trees, that a mountaineer would have shunned. But straightway she stopped and looked around her puzzled. Surely she had not come down this way when she skirted the manzanita. She remembered coming in among the trees from the right. She turned and went that way, saw her filling footprints in the snow, and plodded back. There were tracks coming down the hill, and she had not made them. They must surely be Jack's.

With the new wisdom of having tramped nearly every day through snow, she studied these new tracks and her own where she had come to the spruce tree. These other tracks, she decided, had been made lately — she must have missed by minutes seeing him pass before her. Perhaps she could overtake him. So she faced the wind and ran gasping down the slope, following the tracks. She nearly caught Mike unaware, but she did not know it. She hurried unsuspectingly past the tree where he was hiding, his rifle held ready to fire if she looked his way. He was hesitating, mumbling there with his finger on the trigger when she went out of sight around a bush, still following where the tracks led. Mike stepped out from behind the tree and came bowlegging after her, walking with that peculiar, flat-footed gait of the mountain trained man.

Luck was with her. Jack had gone down a gully rim, thinking to cross it farther on, ran into rocks and a precipitous bank, and was coming back upon his trail. He met Marion face to face. She gave a cry that had in it both tears and laughter, and stood looking at him big-eyed over her muff.

"Well, forevermore! I thought I never would catch you! I was going to the cave —" Something in Jack's scrutinizing, unfriendly eyes stopped her.

"Sorry, but I'm not at home," he said. There was more than a sulky mood in his tone. Marion was long since accustomed to the boyish gruffness with which Jack strove to hide heartaches. This was different. It froze her superficial cheerfulness to a panicky conviction that Jack had in some manner discovered her betrayal of him; or else he had taken alarm at Hank's prowling.

"What's the matter, Jack? Did you find out about — anybody knowing you're here? Are you beating it, now?"

"I don't know what you mean." Jack still eyed her with that disconcerting, measuring look that seemed to accuse without making clear just what the specific accusation might be. "How do you mean — beating it?"

"I mean — oh, Jack, I did an awful thing, and I came up to tell you. And Hank Brown knows something, I'm sure, and that worries me, too. I came out to see if I could meet you, the other day, while Doug stayed with Kate. And I ran right onto Hank Brown, and he began asking about you right away, Jack, and hinting things and talking about tracks. He showed me where you had waited behind the tree, and where we stood and talked, and he guessed about my bringing cigarettes, even. He's the foxiest thing — he just worked it all out and kept grinning so mean — but I fooled him, though. I made him think it was Fred that had been out hunting, and that I met him, and the package had candy in it. I had to kid him away from the subject of you — and then the big rube got so fresh — I had the awfullest time you ever saw, Jack, getting away from the fool.

"But the point I'm getting at is that he suspects something. He said you hadn't been near Quincy, and there must be some reason. He said you didn't have any mine located, because you hadn't filed any claim, or anything. But that isn't the worst —"

"I don't care what Hank thinks." Jack pulled the collar of his coat closer to his ears, because of the seeking wind and snow. "Get under the cedar, while I tell you. I was going without seeing you, because I saw you and Hank together and I didn't like the looks of it. I was sore as a goat, Marion, and that's the truth. But it's like this: I'm going back home. I can't stand it any longer — I don't mean the way I've been living, though that ain't any soft graft either. But it's mother I'm thinking of. I never gave her a square deal, Marion.

"I — you know how I have felt about her, but that's all wrong. She's been all right — she's a brick. I'm the one that's given the raw deal. I've been a selfish, overbearing, good-for-nothing ass ever since I could walk, and if she wasn't a saint she'd have kicked me out long ago. Why, I sneaked off and left a lie on her dresser, and never gave her a chance to get the thing straight, or anything. I tell you, Marion, if I was in her place, and had a measly cub of a son like I've been, I'd drown him in a tub, or something. Honest to John, I wouldn't have a brat like that on the place! How she's managed to put up with me all these years is more than I can figure; it gets my goat to look back at the kinda mark I've been — strutting around, spending money I never earned, and never thanking her — feeling abused, by thunder, because she didn't — oh, it's hell! I can't talk about it. I'm going back and see her, and tell her where I stand. She'll kick me out if she's got any sense, but that'll be all right. I'll see her, and then I'm going to the chief of police and straighten out that bandit stuff. I'm going to tell just how the play came up — just a josh, it was. I'll tell 'em — it'll be bad enough, at that, but maybe it'll do some good — make other kids think twice before they get to acting smart-alecky.

"So you run along home, Marion, and maybe some day — if they don't send me up for life, or anything like that — maybe I'll have the nerve to tell yuh —" A dark flush showed on his cheek-bones, that were gaunt from worry and hard living. He moved uneasily, tugging at the collar of his sweater.

"You've got your nerve now, Jack Corey, if you want to know what I think," Marion retorted indignantly. "Why, you're going up against an awfully critical time! And do you think for a minute, you big silly kid, that I'll let you go alone? I — I never did — ah — respect you as much as I do right now. I — well, I'm going right along with you. I'm going to see that chief of police myself, and I'm going to see your mother. And if they don't give you a square deal, I'm going to tell them a few things! I —"

"You can't go. Don't be a fool, sweetheart. You mustn't let on that you've thrown in with me at all, and helped me, and all that. I appreciate it — but my friendship ain't going to be any help to —"

"Jack Corey, I could shake you! The very idea of you talking that way makes me wild! I am going. You can't stop me from riding on the train, can you? And you can't stop me from seeing the chief —"

"I'd look nice, letting your name get mixed up with mine! Sweetheart, have some sense!" Jack may not have known what name he had twice called her, but Marion's eyes lighted with blue flames.

"Some things are better than sense — sweetheart," she said, with a shy boldness that startled her. The last word was spoken into the snow-matted fur of her muff, but Jack heard it.

"You — oh, God! Marion, do you — care?" He reached out and caught her by the shoulders. "You mustn't. I'm not fit for a girl like you. Maybe some day —"

"Some day doesn't mean anything at all. This part of today is what counts. I'm going with you. I — I feel as if I'd die if I didn't. If they send you to jail, I'll make them send me too — if I have to rob a Chinaman!" She laughed confusedly, hiding her face. "It's awful, but I simply couldn't live without — without —"

"Me? Say, that's the way I've been feeling about you, ever since Lord knows how long. But I didn't suppose you'd ever —"

"Say, my feet are simply freezing!" Marion interrupted him. "We'll have to start on. It would be terrible if we missed the train, Jack."

"You oughtn't to go. Honestly, I mean it. Unless we get married, it would —"

"Why, of course we'll get married! Have I got to simply propose to you? We'll have to change at Sacramento anyway — or we can change there just as well as not — and we'll get married while we're waiting for the train south. I hope you didn't think for a minute that I'd —"

"It isn't fair to you." Jack moved out from under the sheltering cedar and led the way up the gully's rim, looking mechanically for an easy crossing. "I'm a selfish enough brute without letting you —"

Marion plucked at his sleeve and stopped him. "Jack Corey, you tell me one thing. Don't you — want me to — marry you? Don't you care — ?"

"Listen here, honey, I'll get sore in a minute if you go talking that way!" He took her in his arms, all snow as she was, and kissed her with boyish energy. "You know well enough that I'm crazy about you. Of course I want you! But look at the fix I'm in: with just about a hundred dollars to my name —"

"I've got money in my muff to buy a license, if you'll pay the preacher, Jack. We'll go fifty-fifty on the cost —"

"And a darned good chance of being sent up for that deal the boys pulled off —"

"Oh, well, I can wait till you get out again. Say, I just love you with that little lump between your eyebrows when you scowl! Go on, Jack; I'm cold. My gracious, what a storm! It's getting worse, don't you think? When does that train go down, Jack? We'll have to be at the station before dark, or we might get lost and miss the train, and then we would be in a fix! I wish to goodness I'd thought to put on my blue velvet suit — but then, how was I going to know that I'd need it to get married in?"

Jack stopped on the very edge of the bank, and held back the snow-laden branches for her to pass. "You're the limit for having your own way," he grinned. "I can see who's going to be boss of the camp, all right. Come on — the sooner we get down into lower country, the less chance we'll have of freezing. We'll cross here, and get down in that thick timber below. The wind won't catch us quite so hard, and if a tree don't fall on us we'll work our way down to the trail. Give me a kiss. This is a toll gate, and you've got to pay —"

Standing so, with one arm flung straight out against the thick boughs of a young spruce, he made a fair target for Mike back there among the trees. Mike was clean over the edge now of sanity. The two spies had come together — two against one, and searching for him to kill him, as he firmly believed. When they had stood under the cedar he thought that they were hiding there, waiting for him to walk into the trap they had set. He would have shot them, but the branches were too thick. When they moved out along the gulch, Mike ran crouching after, his rifle cocked and ready for aim. You would have thought that the man was stalking a deer. When Jack stopped and turned, with his arm flung back against the spruce, he seemed to be looking straight at Mike.

Mike aimed carefully, for he was shaking with terror and the cold of those heights. The sharp pow-w of his rifle crashed through the whispery roar of the pines, and the hills flung back muffled echoes. Marion screamed, saw Jack sag down beside the spruce, clutched at him wildly, hampered by her muff. Saw him go sliding down over the bank, into the gulch, screamed again and went sliding after him.

Afterwards she remembered a vague impression she had had, of hearing some one go crashing away down the gully, breaking the bushes that impeded his flight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

THE MISERERE OF MOTHERHOOD

THE up-train came shrieking out of the last tunnel in Feather River Canyon, churned around a curve, struck a hollow roar from the trestle that bridges the mouth of Toll-Gate creek, shrieked again when it saw, down the white trail of its headlight, the whirling snow that swept down the canyon, and churned up the stiff grade that would carry it around through the Pocket at the head of the canyon and to the little yellow station just beyond. A fight it would have to top the summit of the Sierras and slip down into the desert beyond, but it climbed the grade with a vicious kind of energy, twisted around the point of the hill where the Crystal Lake trail crossed and climbed higher, and with a last scream at the station lights it slewed past the curve, clicked over a switch or two and stood panting there in the storm, waiting to see whether it might go on and get the ordeal over with at once, or whether it must wait until the down train passed.

A thin, yellow slip ordered it to wait, since it was ten minutes behind time. The down train was just then screaming into Spring Garden and would come straight on. So the up train stood there puffing like the giant thing it was, while the funny little train from Quincy fussed back upon a different siding and tried its best to puff as loud as its big, important neighbor while it waited, too, for the down train.

Two men and a woman plowed through the wind and the snow and mounted wearily the steps of the little coach which comprised the branch line's passenger service. The two men took it all as a matter of course — the bare little coach with plush seats and an air of transient discomfort. They were used to it, and they did not mind.

The woman, however, halted inside the door and glanced around her with incredulous disdain. She seemed upon the point of refusing to ride in so crude a conveyance; seemed about to complain to the conductor and to demand something better. She went forward under protest and drew her gloved fingers across the plush back of a seat, looked at her fingers and said, "Hmh!" as though her worst fears were confirmed. She looked at one of the men and spoke as she would speak to a servant.

"Is there no other coach on this train?"

"No, ma'am!" the man said, accenting the first word as though he wished to prevent argument. "It's this or walk."

"Hmh!" said the lady, and spread a discarded newspaper upon the seat, and sat down. "Thank you," she added perfunctorily, and looked out of the window at what she could see of the storm.

The down train thundered in, just then, and with a squealing of brakes stopped so that its chair car blotted her dismal view of the close hillside. Between the two trains the snow sifted continuously, coming out of the gray wall above, falling into the black shadows beneath. Two or three bundled passengers with snow packed in the wrinkles of their clothing went down the aisle of the chair-car, looking for seats.

It was all very depressing, wearisome in the extreme. The lady settled herself deeper into her furs and sighed.

She continued to sigh at intervals during the remainder of the trip. The last and the heaviest sigh of all she heaved when she settled down to sleep in a hotel bedroom and thought miserably of a certain lovable, if somewhat headstrong, young man who was out somewhere in these terrible mountains in the storm, hiding away from the world and perhaps suffering cold and hunger.

Thoughts of that kind are not the best medicine for sleeplessness, and it was long after midnight before

Mrs. Singleton Corey drifted insensibly from heartsick reflections into the inconsequent imaginings of dreams. She did not dream about Jack, which was some comfort; instead, she dreamed that she was presiding over a meeting of her favorite club.

She awoke to the chill of an unheated room during a winter storm. The quiet lulled her at first into the belief that it was yet very early, but sounds of clashing dishes in a pan somewhere in a room beneath her seemed to indicate breakfast. She would have telephoned down for her breakfast to be served in her room, but there was no telephone or call bell in sight. She therefore dressed shiveringly and groped through narrow hallways until she found the stairs. The mournful *whoo-ooing* of the wind outside gripped at her heartstrings. Jack was out somewhere in this, hiding in a cave. She shivered again.

In the dining room, where two belated breakfasters hurried through their meal, Mrs. Singleton Corey tried to pull herself together; tried to shut out sentiment from her mind, that she might the better meet and handle practical emergencies. It would not do, of course, to announce her motive in coming here. She would have to find this Miss Humphrey first of all. She unfolded her napkin, laid it across her lap and waited.

"They can't do much till this storm lets up," a man at the next table observed to his companion. "Uh course, I s'pose they'll make some kinda bluff at trying — but believe me, these hills is no snap in a snowstorm, and don't I know it! I got caught out, once,— and I like to of stayed out. No, sir —"

"How's the trains, Barney?" the other called to a man who had just come in from the office.

"Trains! Ain't any trains, and there won't be. There's four slides between here and Keddie — Lord knows how many there is from there on down. Wires are all down, so they can't get any word. Nothing moving the other way, either. It's the rain coming first, that softened things up, and then the weight of the snow pulled things loose. Take your time about your breakfast," he grinned. "You'll have quite a board bill before you get away from here."

"Anybody starting out to hunt that girl?" the first speaker asked him. "Can't do much till the storm lets up, can they?"

"Well, if they wait till the storm lets up," Barney retorted drily, "they might just as well wait till spring. What kinda folks do you think we are, around here? Forest Service started a bunch out already. Bill Dunevant, he's getting another party made up."

"It's a fright," the second man declared. "I don't know a darn thing about these mountains, but if somebody'll stake me to a horse, I'll go and do what I can."

"When was it they brought word?"

"Fellow got down to the station about an hour ago and phoned in, is the way I heard it," Barney said. "He had to wait till the office opened up."

Mrs. Singleton Corey laid her unused napkin on the table beside her unused knife and fork, and rose from her chair. She had a feeling that this matter concerned her, and that she did not want to hear those crude men pulling her trouble into their talk. With composed obliviousness to her surroundings she walked out into the office, quite ignoring the astonishment of the waitress who held Mrs. Singleton Corey's butter and two biscuits in her hands by the table. She waited, just within the office, until the man Barney sensed her impatience and returned from the dining room.

"I should like to go to a place called Toll-Gate cabin," she told him calmly. "Can you arrange for a conveyance of some kind? I see that an automobile is out of the question, probably, with so much snow on the ground. I should like to start as soon as possible."

The man looked at her with a startled expression. "Why, I don't know. No, ma'am, I'm afraid a rig couldn't make it in this storm. It's halfway up the mountain — do you happen to know the young lady that was lost up there, yesterday?"

"Has a young lady been lost up there?" The eyes of Mrs. Singleton Corey dwelt upon him compellingly.

"Yes, ma'am, since yesterday forenoon. We just got word of it a while ago. They're sending out searching parties now. She was staying at Toll-Gate —"

"Is Toll-Gate a town?"

"No, ma'am. Toll-Gate is just the name of a creek. There's a cabin there, and they call it Toll-Gate cabin. The girl stayed there."

"Ah. Can you have some sort of conveyance —"

"Only conveyance I could promise is a saddle horse, and that won't be very pleasant, either. Besides, it's dangerous to go into the woods, a day like this. I don't believe you better try it till the weather clears. It ain't anything a lady had ought to tackle — unless maybe it was a matter of life and death." He looked at her dubiously.

Mrs. Singleton Corey pressed her lips together. Any recalcitrant club member, or her son, could have told him then that surrender was the only recourse left to him.

"Please tell your searching party that I shall go with them. Have a saddle horse brought for me, if you can find nothing better. I shall be ready in half an hour. Tell one of the maids to bring me coffee, a soft-boiled egg and buttered toast to my room." She turned and went up the stairs unhurriedly, as goes one who knows that commands will be obeyed. She did not look back, or betray the slightest uneasiness, and Barney, watching her slack-jawed until she had reached the top, pulled on a cap and went off to do her bidding.

Mrs. Singleton Corey was not the woman to let small things impede her calm progress toward a certain goal. She proved that beyond all doubt when she ordered a saddle horse, for she had last ridden upon the back of a horse when she was about fourteen years old. She had a vague notion that all horses nowadays were trained from their colthood to buck — whatever that was. Rodeo posters and such printed matter upon the subject as her eye could not escape had taught her that much, but she refused to be dismayed. Moreover, she was aware that it would probably be necessary for her to ride astride, as all women seemed to ride nowadays: yet she did not falter.

From her beautifully fitted traveling bag she produced a pair of ivory-handled manicure scissors, lifted her three-hundred-dollar fur-lined coat from a hook behind the door and proceeded deliberately to ruin both scissors and coat by slitting the back of the coat up nearly to the waist-line, so that she could wear it comfortably on horseback. Her black broadcloth skirt was in imminent danger of the same surgical revision when a shocked young waitress with the breakfast tray in her hands uttered shrill protest.

"Oh, don't go and ruin your skirt that way! They've got you a four-horse team and sleigh, Mrs. Corey. Mercy, ain't it awful about that poor girl being lost? Excuse me — are you her mother, Mrs. Corey?"

Mrs. Singleton Corey, sitting now upon the bed, lifted her aloof glance from the mutilated coat. "Set the things on the chair, there, since there is no table. I do not know the girl at all." And she added, since it seemed necessary to make oneself very plain to these people: "I think that will be all, thank you." She even went a step farther and gave the girl a tip, which settled all further overtures toward conversation.

The girl went off and cried, and called Mrs. Singleton Corey a stuck-up old hen who would freeze — and serve her right. She even hoped that Mrs. Singleton Corey would get stuck in a snowdrift and have to walk every step of the way to Toll-Gate. Leaving her breakfast when it was all on the table, just as if it would hurt her to eat in the same room with people, and then acting like that to a person! She wished she had let the old catamaran spoil her skirt; and so on.

Mrs. Singleton Corey never troubled herself over the impression she made upon the servant class. She regretted the publicity that seemed to have been given her arrival and her further journey into the hills. It annoyed her to have the girl calling her Mrs. Corey so easily; it seemed to imply an intimate acquaintance with her errand which was disquieting in the extreme. Was it possible that the Humphrey woman had been talking to outsiders? Or had the police really gotten upon the trail of Jack?

She hurried into her warmest things, drank the coffee because it would stimulate her for the terrible journey ahead of her, and went down to find the four-horse team waiting outside, tails whipping between shivering hind legs, hips drawn down as for a lunge forward, heads tossing impatiently. The red-faced driver was bundled to his eyes and did not say a word while he tucked the robes snugly down around her feet.

The snow was driving up the street in a steady wind, but Mrs. Singleton Corey faced it undauntedly. She saw the white-veiled plaza upon one side, the row of little stores huddled behind bare trees upon the other side. It seemed a neat little town, a curiously placid little town to be so buffeted by the storm. Behind it the mountain loomed, a dark blur in the gray-white world. Beautiful, yes; but Mrs. Singleton Corey was not looking for beauty that day. She was a mother, and she was looking for her boy.

Two men, with two long-handled shovels, ran out from a little store halfway down the street and, still running, threw themselves into the back of the sleigh.

"Better go back and get another shovel," the driver advised them, pulling up. "I forgot mine. Anything they want me to haul up? Where's them blankets? And say, Hank, you better go into the drugstore and get a bottle of the best liquor they've got. Brandy."

"I've got a bottle of rye," the man standing behind Mrs. Singleton Corey volunteered. "Stop at the Forest Service, will you? They've got the blankets there. We can get another shovel from them."

The driver spoke to his leaders, and they went on, trotting briskly into the wind. Blurred outlines of cottages showed upon either hand. Before one of these they stopped, and a young man came out with a roll of canvas-covered bedding balanced upon his bent shoulders. Hank climbed down, went in and got a shovel.

"Ain't heard anything more?" questioned the driver, in the tone one involuntarily gives to tragedy.

The young man dumped his burden into the back of the sleigh and shook his head. "Our men are going to stay up there till they find her," he said. "There's a sack of grub I wish you'd take along."

He glanced at Mrs. Singleton Corey, whose dark eyes were staring at him through her veil, and ran back into the house. Running so, with his back turned, his body had a swing like Jack's, and her throat ached with a sudden impulse toward weeping.

He was back in a minute with a knobby sack of something very heavy, that rattled dully when he threw it in. "All right," he called. "Hope yuh make it, all right."

"Sure, we'll make it! May have to shovel some —"

Again they started, and there were no more stops. They swung down a straight bit of road where the wind swept bitterly and the hills had drawn back farther into the blur. They drew near to one that slowly disclosed snow-matted pine trees upon a hillside; skirted this and ploughed along its foot for half a mile or so and then turned out again into a broad, level valley. Now the mountains were more than ever blurred and indistinct, receding into the distance.

"Do we not go into the mountains?" Mrs. Singleton Corey laid aside her aloofness to ask, when the valley seemed to stretch endlessly before them.

"Sure. We'll strike 'em pretty soon now. Looks a long ways, on account of the storm. You any relation to the girl that's lost?"

"I do not know her at all." But trouble was slowly thawing the humanity in Mrs. Singleton Corey, and she softened the rebuff a little. "It must be a terrible thing to be lost in these mountains."

"Far as I'm concerned," spoke up Hank from behind them, 'they're either two of 'em lost, or there ain't anybody lost. I've got it figured that either she's at the camp of that feller that's stayin' up there somewheres around Taylor Rock, or else the feller's lost too. I'll bet they're together, wherever they be."

"What feller's that, Hank?" the driver twisted his head in his muffled collar.

"Feller that had the lookout on Mount Hough las' summer. He's hidin' out up there somewheres. Him an' the girl used to meet — I know that fer sure. Uh course I ain't sayin' anything — but they's two lost er none, you take it from me."

The driver grunted and seemed to meditate upon the matter. "What did that perfessor wade clear down to Marston through the storm for, and report her lost, if she ain't lost?"

"He come down to see if she'd took the train las' night. That's what he come for. She'd went off somewheres before noon, and didn't show up no more. He didn't think she was lost, till Morton told him she hadn't showed up to take no train. That's when the perfessor got scared and phoned in."

The driver grunted again, and called upon his leaders to shake a leg — they'd have walking enough and plenty when they hit the hill, he said. Again they neared the valley's rim, so that pine trees with every branch sagging under its load of snow, fringed the background. Like a pastel of a storm among hills that she had at home, thought Mrs. Singleton Corey irrelevantly. But was it Jack whom the man called Hank referred to? The thought chilled her.

"What's he hidin' out for, Hank? Funny I never heard anything about it." The driver spoke after another season of cogitation, and Mrs. Singleton Corey was grateful to him for seeking the information she needed.

"Well, I dunno what *fur,* but it stands to reason he's on the dodge. All summer long he never showed up in Quincy when he was relieved. Stayed out in the hills — and that ain't natural for a young city feller, is it? 'N' then he was ornery as sin. Got so't I wouldn't pack grub up to him no more. I couldn't go 'im, the way he acted when a feller come around. 'N' then when they closed up the station, he made camp up there somewheres around Taylor Rock, and he ain't never showed his nose in town. If I knowed what *fur,* I might 'a' did something about it. They's a nigger in the woodpile somewheres, you take it from me."

"Well, but that ain't got anything to do with the girl," the driver contested stubbornly. "I know her — she's a mighty fine girl, too; and good-looking as they make 'em. I hauled their stuff up last summer — and them, too. They seem like nice enough folks, all of 'em. And I saw her pretty near every time I hauled tourists up to the lake."

Hank chuckled to himself. "Well, I guess I know 'er, too, mebby a little better'n what you do. I ain't saying anything ag'inst the girl. I say she was in the habit of meeting this feller — Johnny Carew's the name he went by — meetin' him out around different places. They knowed each other, that's what I'm sayin'. And the way I figure, she'd went out to meet him, and either the two of 'em's lost, er else they're both storm-stayed up at his camp. She's mebby home by this time. I look for 'er to be, myself."

"You do, hey?" The driver twisted his head again to look back at Hank. "What yuh going up to help hunt her for, then?"

"Me, I'm just goin' fur the ride," Hank grinned.

They overtook Murphy, plodding along in the horse-trampled, deep snow, with a big, black hat pulled down to his ears, an empty gunny sack over his shoulders like a cape, a quart bottle sticking out of each coat pocket. They took him into the sleigh and went on, through another half mile of lane.

After that they began abruptly to climb through pine forest. In a little they crossed the railroad at the end of a cut through the mountain's great toe. Dismal enough it looked under its heavy blanket of snow that lay smoothly over ties and rails, the telegraph wires sagging, white ropes of snow. Mrs. Singleton Corey glanced down the desolate length of it and shivered.

After that the four horses straightened their backs to steady, laborious climbing up a narrow road arched over with naked oak trees set amongst pines. Here, too, the deep snow was trampled with the passing of horses — the searching party, she knew without being told. The driver spoke to the two behind him, after a ten-minute silence against the heavy background of roaring overhead.

" Know that first turn, up ahead here? If we don't have to shovel through, we'll be lucky."

From the back of the sleigh where he was sitting flat, Murphy spoke suddenly. " A-ah, an' av ye don't have to saw yer trail through a down tree, ye'll be luckier sthill, I dunno. An' it's likely there ain't a saw in the hull outfit! " He spat into the storm and added grimly, " An' how ye're to git the shled around a three-fut tree, I dunno."

" Sure takes you to think up bad luck, Murph," Hank retorted. " We ain't struck any down timber so fur."

" An' ye ain't there yet, neither — not be four mile ye ain't."

Mrs. Singleton Corey, wrapped in her furs, with snow packing full every fold and wrinkle of her clothing left uncovered by the robe, did not hear the aimless argument that followed between Hank and Murphy. The sonorous *shwoo-oosh* of the wind-tormented pine tops surged through the very soul of her, the diapason accompaniment to the miserere of motherhood. Somewhere on this wild mountainside was Jack, huddled from the wind in a cave, or wandering miserably through the storm. Wrapped in soft luxury all her life, Mrs. Singleton Corey shuddered as she looked forth through her silken veil, and saw what Jack was enduring because she had never taught her son to love her; because she had not taught him the lessons of love and trust and obedience.

Of the girl who was lost she scarcely thought. Jack was out here in the cold and the snow and the roaring wind; homeless because she had driven him forth with her coldness; friendless because she had not given him the precious friendship of a mother. Her own son, fearing his mother so much that he was hiding away from her among these terrible, mourning, roaring forests! Behind her veil, her delicately powdered cheeks showed moist lines where the tears of hungry motherhood slid swiftly down from eyes as brown as Jack's and as direct in their gaze, but blurred now and filled with a terrible yearning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

GRIEF, AND HOPE THAT DIED HARD

DURING the months when she had hidden her shame in a sanitarium, Mrs. Singleton Corey first learned how it felt to be unsatisfied with herself. Had learned, too, what it meant to have her life emptied of Jack's roisterous personality. She had learned to doubt the infallibility of her own judgments, the justice of her own viewpoints. She had attained a clarity of vision that enabled her to see herself a failure where she had taken it for granted that she was a success. She had failed as a mother. She had not taught her son to trust her, to love her — and she had discovered how much she craved his love and his trust.

Now she was learning other things. For the first time in her sheltered life Mrs. Singleton Corey knew what it meant to be cold; bitterly cold — cold to the middle of her bones. As Murphy had predicted, a tree had fallen across the trail, so close to their passing that they had heard the crash of it and had come up to see the branches still quivering from the impact. Before then Mrs. Singleton Corey had learned the feel of biting cold, when she waited on a bald nose of the hill while three shovels lifted the snow out of the road so that they could go on. Her unaccustomed ears had learned the sound of able-bodied swearing because the horseman had taken a short-cut over the hill and so had not broken the trail here for the team.

Then, because the driver had not prepared for the emergency of fallen trees — rather, because the labor of removing a section would have been too long even if they had brought axes and a cross-cut saw — she learned how it felt to be plodding through snow to her aristocratic knees. She had to walk a mile and a half to reach Toll-Gate cabin, which was the only shelter on the mountainside, save the cabin of Murphy and Mike, which was out of the question. She had to walk, since she declined to ride one of the horses bareback; so she was tired, for the first time in her pampered life, and she knew that always before then she had merely played at being tired.

The driver, being unable to go farther with the sleigh, and having a merciful regard for his four horses, turned back when the men had lifted the sleigh around so that it faced townward. So Mrs. Singleton Corey had the novel experience of walking with the assistance of Murphy, whose hands were eager to help the lady, whose tongue was eager to while away the wearisome journey with friendly converse, whose breath was odorous of bad whisky. The other two men went ahead with the blankets and the gunny-sack of supplies, and broke trail for Murphy and the lady whose mission remained altogether a mystery, whose manner was altogether discouraging to curiosity.

Those of us who have never experienced hardships, never plumbed the black depths of trouble, never suffered desperate anguish, are too prone to belittle the suffering of others. Mrs. Singleton Corey had always secretly believed that suffering meant merely a certain bearable degree of discomfort. In exalted moments she had contemplated simple living as a desirable thing, good to purge one's soul of trivialities. Life in the raw was picturesque.

She changed her mind with a suddenness that was painful when she tottered thankfully into Toll-Gate cabin and found the main room unswept and with the breakfast dishes cold and cluttered upon the rough, homemade table. And Kate crying on a couch in the other room, close enough to the heating stove so that she could keep the fire up without putting her injured foot to the floor. She did not know this disheveled woman with swollen eyes and a soiled breakfast cap and an ugly bathrobe and one foot bandaged like a caricature of a gouty member of plutocracy. The Kate Humphrey she hazily remembered had been a careful product of refinement, attired in a black lace evening gown and wearing very good imitation pearls.

But Mrs. Singleton Corey gave no more than one glance at Kate, who hurriedly pulled her bathrobe together and made a half-hearted attempt to rise and greet her properly. The stove looked like a glimpse of paradise, and Mrs. Singleton Corey pulled up a straight-backed chair and sat down with a groan of thankfulness, pulling her snow-sodden skirts up above her shoetops to let a little warmth reach her patrician limbs. She fumbled at the buttons of her coat and threw it open, laid a palm eloquently upon her aching side and groaned again.

But the dauntless Mrs. Singleton Corey could not for long permit her spirit to be subdued, especially since she had not yet found Jack.

"Well, can you get word to my son that I am here and should like to see him?" she asked, as soon as the chill had left her a little. "This is a terrible storm," she added politely.

Even when Kate had explained how impossible it was to get word to any one just then, Mrs. Singleton Corey refused to yield one bit of her composure to the anxiety that filled her. She simply sat and looked at poor Kate like the chairman of a ways-and-means committee who is waiting to hear all the reports.

"You think, then, that the young woman went to meet Jack?"

"I know she did. She was furious because I had not concealed the fact of his being here, but I felt that I owed it —"

"Yes, to be sure. And where would she be most likely to meet him? Do you know?"

"I know where she did meet him," Kate retorted with an edge to her voice. "She couldn't have gotten lost, though, if she had gone there. It is close to the road you traveled. Doug — Professor Harrison has led a party up where Marion said Jack had his cave. If they are there, we shall know it as soon as they come back."

"Yes, certainly. And if they are not there?" Mrs. Singleton Corey held her voice firm though the heart within her trembled at the terrible possibility.

"Well — she didn't take the train, we know that positively. She *must* be up there with Jack!"

Mrs. Singleton Corey knew very well that Kate was merely propping her hope with the statement, but she was glad enough to accept the prop for her own hopes. So they talked desultorily and with that arms-length amiability which is the small currency of polite conversation between two strange women, and Mrs. Singleton Corey laid aside her dignity with her fur-lined coat, and made tea for them — since Kate could not walk.

Late in the afternoon men began to straggle into the cabin, fagged and with no news of Marion. The professor was brought back so exhausted that he could not walk without assistance, and talked incoherently of being shot at, up near the peak, and of being unable to reach Taylor Rock on account of the furious wind and the deep drifts.

Hank Brown declared that he could make it in the morning, and one or two others volunteered to go with him. It began to seem more and more likely that Marion was up there and compelled by the storm to stay, in whatever poor refuge Jack might have. It seemed useless to make any further attempt at hiding Jack's identity and whereabouts, although Mrs. Singleton Corey, with a warning glance at Kate and a few carefully constructed sentences, managed to convey the impression that Jack had been hiding away from her, after a quarrel between them which had proved merely a misunderstanding. She was vastly relieved to see that her explanation was accepted, and to know that if Quincy had ever heard of the auto-bandit affair, it had forgotten all about it long ago.

Still, that was a small relief, and temporary. Until the next day they were hopeful, and the physical discomfort of staying in that crude little cabin with a lot of ungrammatical, roughly clad men, and of having no maid to serve her and not even the comfort of privacy, loomed large in the mind of Mrs. Singleton Corey. Never before in her life had she drunk coffee with condensed cream in it, or eaten burned bread with stale butter, and boiled beans and bacon. Never before had she shared the bed of another woman, or slept in a borrowed nightgown that was too tight in the arms. To Mrs. Singleton Corey these things bore all the earmarks of tragedy.

But the next day real tragedy pushed small discomforts back into their proper perspective. It still stormed, though not so furiously, and with fitful spells of sunlight breaking through the churning clouds. The men left the cabin at daylight, and Mrs. Singleton Corey found herself practically compelled to wash the dishes and sweep the floor and wait on the distracted Kate who was crushed under the realization of Mrs. Singleton Corey's disgust at her surroundings. Conversation languished that day. Mrs. Singleton Corey sat in a straight-backed chair and stared out of the window that faced the little basin, and waited for Jack to come. She had suffered much, and she felt that fate owed her a speedy return of the prodigal.

Instead of that they brought Hank Brown to the cabin, dead on a makeshift stretcher. When the shock of that had passed a little, so that her mind could digest details, Mrs. Singleton Corey learned, with a terrible, vise-like contraction of the heart, that Hank had climbed ahead of the others and had almost reached the place they called Taylor Rock, where Jack was said to have his cave. Those below had heard a rifle shot, and they had climbed up to find Hank stretched dead in the snow. Two men had searched the vicinity as well as they could, but they had found nothing at all. The snow, they said, was drifted twenty feet deep in some places.

They did not tell her what they thought about it, but Mrs. Singleton Corey knew. And Kate knew. And the two women's eyes would not meet, after that, and their voices were constrained, their words formal when they found it necessary to have speech with each other.

Mrs. Singleton Corey forgot the crudities and the discomforts of Toll-Gate cabin after that. She watched the trail, and her eyes questioned dumbly every man that came in for rest and food before going out again to the search. They always went again, fighting their way through the storm that never quite cleared. They went forth, with a dogged persistence and a courage that made Mrs. Singleton Corey marvel in spite of her absorption in her own anxiety.

Men with fresh horses and fresh supplies came up from the valley, and the search went on, settling to a loose system of signals, relief shifts and the laying out of certain districts for certain men to cover, yard by yard. The body of Hank Brown was lashed upon a horse and taken down to Quincy, and in the evening the mystery of his death was discussed in the kitchen, where the men sat in a haze of tobacco smoke. Mike had been reported absent from his cabin, the day that Murphy came up from the valley, and he had not returned. So there was mystery in plenty to keep the talk going. One man shot dead from ambush and three persons missing, were enough to stir the most phlegmatic soul — and Mrs. Singleton Corey, however self-possessed her manner, was not phlegmatic.

Stormy day followed stormy day, and still they found no trace of Marion, got no glimpse of Jack. There were days when the wind made it physically impossible to climb the peak and search for the cave under Taylor Rock, dangerous to be abroad in the woods. Hank had said that he knew about where the cave was — but Hank's lips were closed forever upon garrulous conversation. Two or three others were more or less familiar with that barren crest, having hunted bear in that locality. They led the parties that turned their faces toward the peak whenever the wind and the snow promised to hold back for a time.

They began to whisper together, out in the kitchen where they thought that Mrs. Singleton Corey could not hear. They whispered about the fight that had taken place up at the lookout station, last summer, when Hank had ridden into town sullen and with blackened eyes and swollen lips, and had cursed the lookout on Mt. Hough. It began to seem imperative that they locate that cave as soon as possible, and the man who had shot Hank.

Kate mourned because Fred was not there, and talked as though his presence would right nearly everything. That, and the whispering and the meaning glances among the men when she appeared in the room, exasperated Mrs. Singleton Corey almost beyond endurance. Why did they not find Jack and the girl? What possible use could Fred be, more than any other man? Why didn't somebody do something? She had never seen so inefficient a country, it seemed to her. Why, they had even let the trains stop running, and the telegraph lines were all down! Nobody seemed to know when communication with the outside world would be possible. She might have to stay here a month, for all she could learn to the contrary. There was just one cheerful thought connected with the whole thing, and that was the fact that this Fred, of whom Kate talked so much, could not be summoned. Mrs. Singleton Corey felt that another Humphrey in the house would drive her quite mad.

Then one day Murphy came stumbling in to the cabin, just after three or four disheartened searchers had arrived, and announced that he had got on the track of the man that shot Hank Brown.

"An' it's Mike, the crazy fool thot did it, an' I'll bet money on it," he declared, goggling around at his audience. "An' what's more, the rest of ye had betther be travelin' wit' yer eyes open, fer he's crazy as a loon, an' he'll kill anny one that crosses his trail. An' didn't I notice just this marnin' that his rifle was gone wit' him — me dom eyes bein' so near blind thot I c'uldn't see in the corner where it was, an' only fer wantin' a belt that hung on a nail there, I w'uldn't av been feelin' around at all where the gun sh'uld be standin'. An' it's gone, an' I mind me now the talk he was makin' about sphies in the woods, an' thot the gurrl had betther look out, an' the feller up on the peak had betther look out, an' me thinkin' he was talkin' becawse av the railroad tie thot hit 'im wanct, an' hushed 'im up whin I sh'uld 'a' been takin' 'im in to the crazy house, I dunno. An' if he's kilt the gurrl an' the missus' boy, like he kilt Hank Brown, it's like he's found the cave the lad was livin' in, an' is sthayin' holed up there, I dunno — fer he ain't been near the cabin, an' unlest a tree er a fallin' limb kilt him, he'd have to be sthayin' somewheres. Fer he's kilt the gurrl an' the boy, an' I'll bet money on it, I dunno."

"Looks that way, Murphy —" began one, but he was stopped by a cry that thrilled them with the terrible grief that was in the voice,— grief and hope that was dying hard.

Mrs. Singleton Corey, having stood just within the other room listening, made two steps toward Murphy and fell fainting to the kitchen floor.

CHAPTER TWENTY - FOUR

TROUBLE FINDS THE GOLD THAT WAS IN THEM

AFTER that nothing seemed to matter. The days slipped by and Mrs. Singleton Corey cared so little that she did not count them or call them by name. She would sit by the one window that faced the Basin and watch the trail beaten in the deep snow by the passing of many feet, and brood over the days when she might have won Jack and by the very closeness of their love have saved him from this. Had she done her part, Jack would not have lied to her about that trip to Venice; he would not have dreamed of such a thing. It hurt terribly to think how close she had been to happiness with Jack and how unthinkingly she had let it slip from her while she centered her interest upon other things that held no comfort for her now — now when all she asked of life was to give her back her son alive.

Men came and went, and answered the heartbreaking question in her big brown eyes with cheerful words that did not, somehow, cheer. The storm was over, they told her, and now they would have a better chance. She mustn't think of what Murphy said — Murphy was an old fool. She mustn't give up. And even while they talked she knew by their eyes that they had given up long ago, and only kept up the pretense of hopeful searching for her sake.

Because the partition was only one thickness of boards she heard them commenting one night on the grim fact that no smoke had been seen at Taylor Rock, though many eyes had watched anxiously for the sign. She listened, and she knew that they were going to give up — knew that they should have given up long ago but for her. With no fire in the cave none could live for long in this weather, she heard them muttering. The cave was drifted full of snow, in the opinion of those who had the most experience with mountain snows. The lost couple might be in the cave, but they were not alive. One man said that they were probably under some fallen tree — and they were many — or buried deep in a gulch somewhere. Certainly after ten days neither Jack nor Marion nor Mike could by any possibility be alive in the hills.

Kate was asleep and did not hear. The professor was out there with the others — probably they thought that Mrs. Singleton Corey was asleep also, for it was growing late. Her chapped knuckles pressed against her trembling lips, she listened awhile, until she could bear no more. How kind they were — these men of Quincy! How they had struggled to keep alive her courage! She got up, opened the door very quietly, and went out into the strong, bluish haze of tobacco smoke that enveloped the men huddled there around the kitchen stove for a last pipe before they turned in. She stood within the door, like "madam president" risen to address the meeting. Like "madam president" she waited for their full attention before she spoke.

"I wish to thank you gentlemen for the heroic efforts you have put forth during the past week," she said, and her low-pitched voice had the full resonance that was one of her charms as a leader among women. "It would be impossible for me to express my grateful appreciation —" She stopped, pressed her lips together for a minute, and when she felt sure of her composure she made a fresh start. "I cannot speak of the risks you have taken in these forests, but I — I appreciate your bravery. I know that you have been in danger from falling trees, nearly every day that you spent searching for — those who are lost. I have learned from your conversations among yourselves how useless you consider the search. I — I am forced to agree with you. Miss Humphrey and Professor Harrison have long ago given up all hope — they say that — that no one could possibly be alive. . . . I — I know that a mother can be terribly selfish when her son . . ." Hard as she fought for steadiness, she could not speak of it. She stood with the back of one hand pressed hard against her shaking lips, swallowing the sobs that threatened to balk her determination to speak a little of the humble gratitude that filled her. The men looked down in embarrassed silence, and in a minute she went on.

"Gentlemen, I know that you have gone on searching because you felt that I wanted you to do it, and you were too kind-hearted to tell me the truth. So I beg of you now to go back to your families. I — I must not let my trouble keep you away from them any longer. I — I — have given up."

Some one drew a long breath, audible in that room, where tragedy held them in silence. It was as though those two lost ones lay stark and cold in their midst; as though this woman was looking down upon her son. But when the silence had tightened their nerves, she spoke again with the quiet of utter hopelessness.

"I must ask you to help me get down the mountain somehow. If the railroad is in operation I shall return home. I wish to say that while I shall carry with me the bitterest sorrow of my life, I shall carry also a deep sense of the goodness and the bravery —"

Proud, yes. But proud as she was she could not go on. She turned abruptly and went back into the room where Kate slept heavily. A little later the sound of stifled sobbing, infinitely sad, went out to the men who sat with cooling pipes in their palms, constrained to silence still by the infinite sadness of motherhood bereaved.

"Tomorrow morning we better start in clearing the road," one muttered at last. "Somebody can ride down and have a team come up after her."

"It's no use to hunt any longer," another observed uneasily. "The snow would cover up —"

"Sh-sh-sh!" warned the professor, and nodded his head toward the room door.

In her own home, that had been closed for months, Mrs. Singleton Corey folded her black veil up over the crown of her black hat and picked up the telephone. Her white hair was brushed up from her forehead in a smooth, cloudy fashion that had in it no more than a hint of marcelle waving. Her face was almost as white as her hair, and her eyes were black-shadowed and sunken. She sat down wearily upon the chair beside the telephone stand, waited dull-eyed for Central to answer, and then called up her doctor. Her voice was calm — too calm. It was absolutely colorless.

Her doctor, on the other hand, became agitated to the point of stuttering when he realized who was speaking to him. His disjointed questions grated on Mrs. Singleton Corey, who was surfeited with emotion and who craved nothing so much as absolute peace.

"Yes, certainly I am back," she drawled with a shade of impatience. "Just now — from the depot. . . . No, I am feeling very well — No, I have not read the papers, and I do not intend to. . . . Really, doctor, I can see no necessity of your coming out here. I am perfectly all right, I assure you. I shall call up the maids and let them know that I am home, but first I have called you, just to ease your mind — providing, of course, that you have one. You seem to have lost it quite suddenly. . . ."

She listened, and caught her breath. Her lips whitened, and her nostrils flared suddenly with what may have been anger. "No, doctor . . . I did not — find — Jack." She forced herself to say it. He would have to know, she reflected.

She was about to add something that would make her statement sound less bald, but the doctor had hung up, muttering something she did not catch. She waited, holding the receiver to her ear until Central, in that supercilious voice we all dislike so much, asked crisply, "Are you waiting?" Then Mrs. Singleton Corey also hung up her receiver and sat there idly gazing at her folded hands.

"I must have a manicure at once," she said to herself irrelevantly, though the heart of her was yearning toward Jack's room upstairs. She wanted to go up and lie down on Jack's bed, and put her head on Jack's pillow. It seemed to her that it would bring her a little closer to Jack. And then she had a swift vision of Taylor Rock, where Jack was said to have his cave. She closed her eyes and shuddered. She could not get close to Jack — she had never been close to him, since he passed babyhood. Perhaps . . . The girl, Marion — had Jack loved her? She was grown used to the jealousy that filled her when she thought of Marion. She forced herself now to think pityingly of the girl, dead up there in that awful snow.

She went upstairs, forgetting to telephone to the maids as she had intended. She moved slowly, apathetically, pausing long before the closed door of Jack's room. She would not go in, after all. Why dig deeper into the grief that must be mastered somehow, if she would go on living? She remembered the maids, and when she had put on one of her soft, silk house gowns that she used to like so well, she went slowly down the stairs, forgetting that she had a telephone in her room, her mind swinging automatically to the one in the hall that she had used as she came in. She had just reached it when the doctor came hurrying up the steps and pressed the bell button. She saw him dimly through the curtained glass of the door, and frowned while she let him in. And then —

She knew that the doctor was propelled violently to one side by some one coming behind him, and she knew that she was dreaming the rest of it. The feel of Jack's arm around her shoulders, and Jack's warm, young lips on her cheeks and her lips and her eyelids, and the sound of Jack's voice calling her endearing pet names that she had never heard him speak while she was awake and he was with her — It was a delicious dream, and Mrs. Singleton Corey smiled tremulously while the dream lasted.

"Gee, I'd like to give you a *real* old bear-hug, but I've got a bum wing and I can't. Gee, we musta passed each other on the road somewhere, because I was streaking it down here to see you — gee, but you look good to me! — and you were streaking it up there to see me —" The adorable young voice hesitated and deepened to a yearning half-whisper. "Did you go away up there just because you — *wanted* to see me? Did you do that, mother? Honest?"

Mrs. Singleton Corey snapped into wakefulness, but she still leaned heavily within her curve of Jack's good arm. Her eyes — brown, and very much like Jack's — stared up with a shining, wonderful gladness into his face. But she was Mrs. Singleton Corey, and she would not act the sentimental fool if she could help it!

"Yes, I — thought I should have to dig you out of a snowdrift, you — young — scamp!"

"She'd a done it, believe *me!* Only I wasn't in any snowdrift, so she couldn't — God love her!" He was half crying all the while and trying to hide it; and half laughing, too, and altogether engrossed in the joy of being able to hold his own mother like that, just as he had hungered to do up there on the mountain.

It was the doctor who saw that emotion had reached the outer edge of safety for Mrs. Singleton Corey. Over her head he scowled and made warning signs to Jack, who gave her a last exuberant squeeze and let the doctor lead her to a chair.

"I've got a wife out in the taxi, mother," he announced next. "She wouldn't come in — she's afraid you won't like her. But you will, won't you? Can't I tell her —"

"Bring her right in here to me, Jack," said Mrs. Singleton Corey, gasping a bit, but fighting still for composure to face this miracle of a pitying God.

Bit by bit the miracle resolved itself into a series of events which, though surprising enough, could not by any stretch of the credulity be called supernatural.

Mrs. Singleton Corey learned that, with a bullet lodged somewhere in the upper, northwest corner of Jack's person, he had nevertheless managed to struggle down through the storm to Marston, with Marion helping him along and doing wonders to keep his nerve up. They had taken the train without showing themselves at the depot, which was perfectly easy, Jack informed her, but cold as the dickens.

She managed to grasp the fact that Jack and Marion had been married in Sacramento, immediately after Jack had his shoulder dressed, and that they had come straight on to Los Angeles, meaning to find her first and face the music afterwards. She was made to understand how terribly in earnest Jack had been, in going straight to the chief of police and letting the district attorney know who he was, and then telling the truth about the whole thing in court. She could not quite see how that had settled the matter, until Jack explained that Fred Humphrey was a good scout, if ever there was one. He had testified for the State, but for all that he had told it so that Jack's story got over big with the jury and the judge and the whole cheese.

Fred Humphrey had remembered what Jack had shouted at the boys when they fired. "— And mother, that was the luckiest call-down I ever handed the bunch. It proved, don't you see, that the hold-up was just a josh that turned out wrong. And it proved the boys weren't planning to shoot — oh, it just showed the whole thing up in a different light, you know, so a blind man had to see it. So they let me go —"

"If you could have seen him, you wouldn't have wondered, Mrs. Corey!" Marion had been dumb for an hour, but she could not resist painting Jack into the scene with the warm hues of romance. "He went there when he ought to have gone to the hospital. Why, he had the highest fever! — and he was so thin and hollow-eyed he just looked simply pathetic! Why, they wouldn't have been human if they had sent him to jail! And he told the whole thing, and how it just started in fooling; and why, it was the grandest, noblest thing a boy could do, when the others had been mean enough to lay all the blame on Jack. And he had his shoulder all bandaged and his arm in a sling, and he looked so — so brave, Mrs. Corey, that —"

Mrs. Singleton Corey reached out and patted Marion on the hand, and smiled strangely. "Yes, my dear — I understand. But I think you might call me mother."

If it cost her something to say that, she was amply repaid. Marion gave her one grateful look and fled, fearing that tears would be misunderstood. And Jack made no move to follow her, but stayed and gathered his mother again into a one-armed imitation of a real bear-hug. I think Jack wiped the last jealous thought out of Mrs. Singleton Corey's mind when he did that. So they clung to each other like lovers, and Jack patted her white cloud of hair that he had never made bold to touch since he was a baby.

"My own boy — that I lost from the cradle, and did not know —" She reached up and drew her fingers caressingly down his weathered cheek, that was losing some of its hardness in the softer air of the South. "Jack, your poor old mother has been cheating herself all these years. Cheating you too, dear —"

"Not much! Your cub of a son has been cheating himself and you. But you watch him make it up. And — mother, don't you think maybe all this trouble has been kind of a good thing after all? I mean — if it's brought the real stuff out to the surface of me, you know —"

"I know. The gold in us all is too often hidden away under so much worthless —"

"Why, forev —" In the doorway Marion checked herself abruptly, because she had resolved to purify her vocabulary of slang and all frivolous expressions. Her eyelids were pink, her lips were moist and tremulous, her face was all aglow. "I — may I please — mother —"

Mrs. Singleton Corey did not loosen her hold of Jack, but she held out her free hand with a beckoning gesture. "Come. I'm going to be a foolishly fond old lady, I know. But I want to hold both my children close, and see if I can realize the miracle."

"Mother!" Jack murmured, as though the word held a wonderful, new meaning. "Our own, for-keeps mother!"

THE END

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